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Looking for Inclusivity in Higher Ed? Start in the Classroom!

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Abstract - The rallying cry for inclusivity has never been greater in higher education. As professors look for ways to ensure all sociocultural perspectives are present in their course activities, lectures and discussions, many questions remain beginning with who should be addressing these issues as well as how exactly this might be accomplished. Increasingly more faculty are opening their classrooms to this discussion, even if diversity is not a required element of their course. Exit interviews conducted in Spring 2021 with senior marketing majors at a Mid Atlantic University provided an opportunity for students to share their perceptions about inclusivity and what it means to them personally, as well as how they feel their business program and university is addressing this issue.

Keywords - EDI, inclusivity, inclusive teaching, inclusive syllabus, diversity, ethnic diversity, equality, proactive social inclusion

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners - Students are acutely aware of the growing importance of Inclusivity and welcome a safe space to learn more about this issue. Professors must assume a greater responsibility and level of comfort in addressing issues like this in the classroom.

Introduction

Equity, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) – these topics and terms are often used interchangeably, combined, and have become increasingly more prominent in discussions in higher education at the administrative level, as well as at the instructional level. As EDI has become a “buzz term” across colleges and universities, more and more questions seem to arise. Who is responsible and who is/should take up the charge for ensuring equity, diversity, and inclusion? What are professors and others doing in this area? Where (what courses) and when (early in the degree process or later) are these discussions taking place? How can we improve and expand on our efforts in this area?

This paper will explore inclusivity from a professor perspective and its tie to diversity through a recent review of the literature on this topic, how courses can be structured to address this growing need at the undergraduate level and the importance of inclusivity by students. It is difficult to address inclusivity without addressing equity and diversity, therefore, we will begin with an overview of each term.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC & U, n.d.) defines Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) as follows:

- Equity as “The creation of opportunities for historically underserved populations to have equal access to and participate in educational programs that are capable of closing the achievement gaps in student success and completion”
- Diversity as “Individual differences (e.g., personality, prior knowledge, and life experiences) and group/social differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, country of origin, and ability as well as cultural, political, religious, or other affiliations)”
- Inclusion as “The active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity—in the curriculum, in the co-curriculum, and in communities (intellectual, social, cultural, geographical) with which individuals might connect—in ways that increase awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions” Essentially, inclusion ensures all sociocultural perspectives have an opportunity to be considered in course activities, lectures, and discussions.

The latest Brookings Report which analyzes data from the US Census Bureau in advance of the 2020 Census reveals that the United States is diversifying even faster than previously predicted (Frey, 2020) and that 2020 will be the first decade that the White Not Hispanic or Latino population experiences a decline in population growth with four in ten Americans identifying with a race/ethnicity other than White. The differences from 1980 to 2020 are stark, with White Not Hispanic or Latino dropping from 80% to 60% while Hispanic Americans have increased from 6.5 percent to 18.5 percent as depicted in Table 1. (US Census Bureau, 2020)

Table 1- US Census Bureau Ethnicity Changes in Percentages from 1980-2020 in US

Year	White Not Hispanic/Latino	Hispanic
1980	80%	6.5%
2020	60%	18.5%

This increasing rate of diversity further illustrates the increasing need for inclusivity in the classroom. Last year, calls for EDI were heard loud and clear across not only the news, but on all forms of social as tragedies, marches and other events transpired in communities across the United States. Nike with its call for “For once, Don’t Do It” (Figure 1) led the rush by brands in 2020 to apologize for racist and discriminatory behavior and shortly after that many of the social media posts began to look the same. As the messaging increased, so did the platforms that carried the messages (Figure 2) (Figure 3) (Figure 4), so much so that even messaging appeared on LinkedIn (Figure 5). Some companies were called out for simply going through the motions and caving to public pressure to speak up.

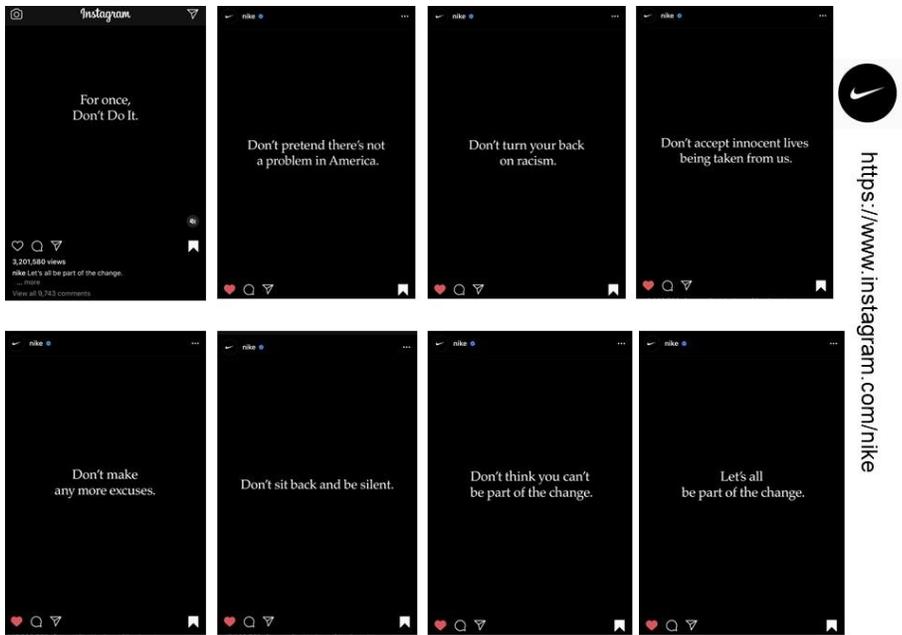


Figure 1- Nike Instagram, May 2020, 5.4 Million Likes



Figure 2- Disney Facebook, May 2020



Figure 3- Coca Cola Twitter, June 2020



Figure 4- Epic Games Instagram, June 2020

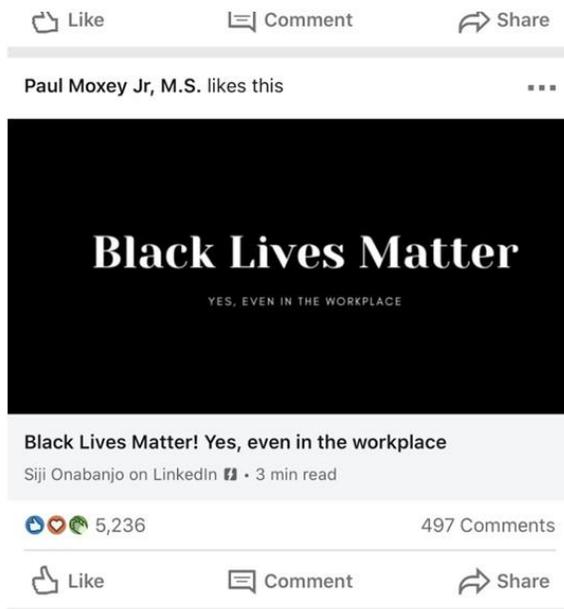


Figure 5- LinkedIn, June 2020

As the year progressed, brands began to take a stand with donations (NAACP, Equal Justice Initiative, Coalition for Social Justice, etc.), pledges to hire black workers (One Ten Coalition), pledges to devote shelf space to Black owned businesses (15% Pledge), companies made good on pledges to rebrand racist products (Eskimo Pie becomes Edy's Pie, Uncle Ben's becomes Ben's Original, Aunt Jemima becomes Pearl Milling Company) and even sports teams announced plans to rebrand (Washington Redskins Football becomes Washington Football and the Cleveland Indians becomes Cleveland). Other companies moved to ban or remove racist material (HBO temporarily removed the *Gone With the Wind* classic from its service and added thought provoking discussion about the historical context of the film).

All these actions further illustrate the need for colleges and universities to address these issues and more in the classroom. A review of the literature indicates an increasing growth

in diversity courses – both required and non-required (Laird and Engberg, 2011) as well as insight into how diversity is being included in the courses. Laird found women and assistant professors are more likely to teach highly inclusive non required diversity courses, while faculty of color, particularly Asian Americans, and part time faculty are more likely to teach required diversity courses in US colleges and universities. In a separate study also by Laird (Laird, 2011), additional key findings showed that more faculty are including diversity in some way in their courses and in addition to women and faculty of color doing so, so do faculty in soft fields. Laird found a majority of faculty try to be inclusive about their students, pedagogies, classroom environment, evaluation, and adjustment. It was also found that course size can affect inclusivity as well, the smaller the class size the more likely the course was to adopt inclusive learning.

There are many ways faculty can encourage inclusivity and diversity including their use of course materials, encouraging different points of view in the classroom, ensuring all voices are heard and feel valued (role modeling), use of personal experience and humor by the instructor and even application of more formal learning activities like interviewing a person not part of the student's identity group (Gordon, Yough, Finney, Haken and Mathew, 2019) Pantic and Florian advocate that teachers become "agents of change" in the context of inclusion and social justice (Pantic and Florian, 2015). Brown sees teachers as change makers that have an opportunity to encourage diverse work teams and reward collaborative work (Brown, 2019). Nishina, Lewis, Bellmore and Witkow propose a proactive inclusion model. In this model, increased opportunities for positive connections with dissimilar peers lead to social inclusion, so the greater the diversity, the greater the inclusivity (Nishina, Lewis, Bellmore & Witkow, 2019)

While many are responsible for diversity and inclusivity (it takes a village) on college campuses: the university in general, administrators, admissions, retention, financial aid, student life, fundraisers, and clearly, instructors play a central role (Gordon, Yough, Finney, Haken and Mathew, 2019) (Armstrong, 2011). Fuentes, Zelaya and Madsen cite eight considerations for promoting EDI beginning with the course syllabus. (Fuentes, Zelaya & Madsen, 2021) Fuentes et al. advocate that instructors infuse EDI into their learning objectives or add a specific learning objective that ensures EDI aspects are addressed in the course. As an example, "In this course . . . students will consider multicultural and diversity aspects as they relate to major concepts of this course." Other considerations include inclusion of a diversity statement. Related to this, ensuring placement of the diversity statement near the beginning of the syllabus as it is more likely to be remembered and then sharing the statement through the school's learning system. Instructors are encouraged to include readings of historically underrepresented and marginalized scholars where appropriate, acknowledge different holidays. Also recommended, rethink assignments and tests, consider a mix of individual and group assignments and if possible, don't always rely on a standardized exam. Finally, explain the importance of office hours at the beginning of the semester. Fuentes et al. encourage faculty to explain how office hours can be used "to connect, ask questions, find support," etc. First generation students are often hesitant to utilize office hours. Faculty might even consider a first week assignment where students must drop by during office hours to say hello and help break the ice!

Armstrong adds “all classrooms are microenvironments of social interaction” and “you’re the meteorologist” (Armstrong, 2011) Additional proactive ways to demonstrate values around inclusivity are to set rules for project work, learn how to pronounce student names correctly, learn about the home country of your students as well as some of their cultural holidays, and ask for informal and anonymous feedback at the end of the course regarding how students perceived the climate for learning. Faculty can also change up examples by citing contexts outside of the US. Furthermore, colleges and universities can provide workshops on inclusive teaching, invite speakers to address this topic in the classroom and offer panel discussions featuring inclusive instructors within the college.

Method

Based on the events of 2020 and the growing importance of diversity, the decision was made to address the topic of inclusivity in Marketing Strategy, the senior capstone for marketing majors in our college. In Spring 2021, the topic of Diversity and Inclusivity was added as a new learning objective to Marketing Strategy. In support of this objective, the syllabus was revised to stress the importance of cultural diversity. In addition, a special topic lecture was developed on the Inclusive Voice. Discussion questions and the opportunity for reflection were included in this learning opportunity. At the end of the course, students were asked to complete a survey on how they viewed Inclusivity at the University, within the College of Business, and in our course. Prior to conducting the survey, questions were shared with the College Dean, and key members of the College’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) Standing Committee. Small modifications were made to the survey based on feedback received. The project is also part of a College Course Enhancement Grant for summer and fall. The college is in the early stages of evaluating DEI in its courses, student organizations and overall marketing communications. This study will assist the DEI Standing Committee in successful completion of its goals.

Results and Discussion

38 students participated in the survey (all the students in the course). The survey was administered through Survey Monkey and students were given one week to complete the survey. Students were asked to submit the last four digits of their UIN upon completion if they wanted credit for completing the survey, and all chose to do this. The average time spent completing the survey was twenty minutes.

Each of the students were marketing majors in their senior year. 26 or 68% of the students were female; 12 or 32% were male. The sample was comprised of 63% White/Caucasian, 26% Black/African American, 5% Hispanic/Latino, 3% Asian/Asian American, and 3% Other (Latino/White mix).

The survey consisted of 16 questions on the topic of diversity and inclusivity. Students were first asked to share what word associations came to mind when they heard the word ‘inclusivity’. A word cloud on this question (Figure 6) revealed equality and diversity were strongly tied to inclusivity, supporting the tie to inclusivity and diversity. Other words tied to this concept were ‘including’ and ‘everyone’.

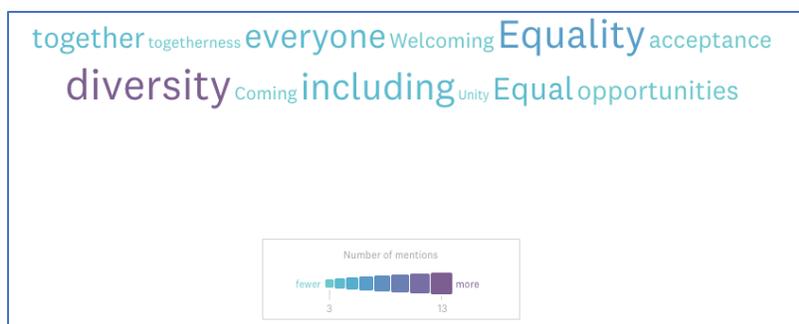


Figure 6- Inclusivity Word Cloud

When students were asked what personal experiences came to mind when they heard the word ‘inclusivity’ several themes emerged, the most often mentioned included relating the concept to some aspect of work (11) and directly tying the concept to the university and the Business College (11). This was closely followed by not including others (9) and students expressing that they wanted to make sure all felt included, even if they themselves have never experienced this feeling themselves (Table 2). A few reflected on the events of 2020 in their response as well as family members introducing this concept to them at an early age.

A few of the more poignant comments shared were:

Table 2- A Sample of What Personal Experiences Come to Mind When You Hear the Word ‘Inclusivity’?

Respondent	Response
6	Making sure you have an inclusive work environment and making sure that everyone feels included. Personally, as far as inclusivity is concerned making sure that multiple perspectives are able to be seen and heard so that everyone can feel included.
7	When I was younger, my older brother was always going on camping trips with his friends. I would want to go so bad, but he would never take me because I was 7 years younger than him. I understand why he would not take me, but I felt very excluded. I guess this would be an example of the opposite of inclusivity.
12	I work with a diverse group of people (both patients and co-workers) and it is important to include everyone and not discriminate. Me and my co-workers are very close and make it a point to include everyone.
19	When I think of inclusivity, I think about how my mom told me to always include everyone when possible because it is the nice thing to do. For example, in grade school you would invite everyone in your class to your birthday party and if you did not want to invite everyone you couldn’t have anyone.
25	I think of my peers sharing experiences about how sometimes they have felt like they were not included in situations.
29	This past year of 2020 moving forward with movements, a large part was inclusivity. Moving forward, together. Protests for police brutality, BLM, standing up for what is right together.
33	I have been lucky enough to never have to really experience non inclusivity in my own life, except for maybe my age. However, in society nowadays I see issues of inclusivity all around me and people fighting for it and companies working hard to achieve it.

If yes, which courses in Strome College have discussed this issue? Please check any of the courses below.

Answered: 38 Skipped: 0

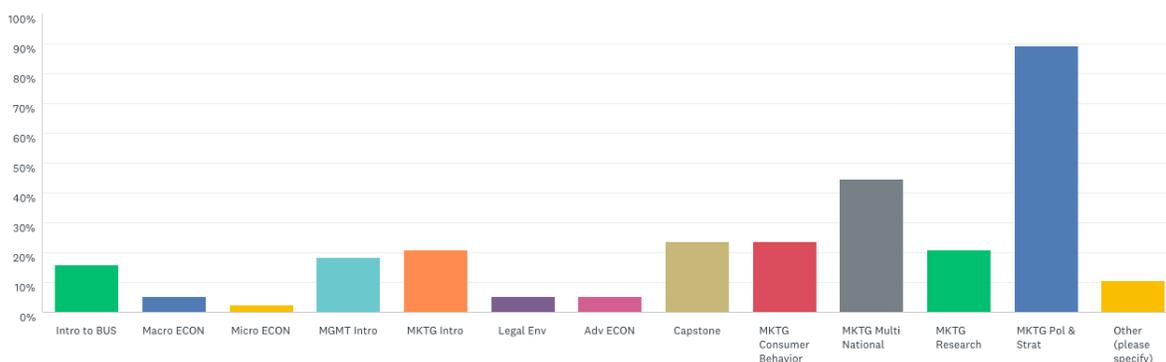


Figure 8- Courses in the Business College That Discussed Inclusivity

Students were also asked to what degree professors in the Business College had improved their overall understanding of inclusivity as well as the degree that Marketing Policy and Strategy capstone had furthered their understanding of this issue. The weighted average for Marketing Policy and Strategy on a 5-point scale was 3.68 compared to 3.11 for the College (Table 3).

Table 3- Level of Improvement Regarding Understanding of Inclusivity

	Greatly Improved –	Significantly Improved –	Improved –	Slightly Improved –	No effect –	Total –	Weighted Average –
Business College Overall	15.79%	21.05%	34.21%	15.79%	13.16%	38	3.11
Marketing Policy and Strategy Class	21.05%	47.37%	15.79%	10.53%	5.26%	38	3.68

Level of improvement regarding understanding of inclusivity

The most significant finding was that nearly 70% said the lecture on inclusivity in the marketing course had furthered their understanding of inclusivity considerably or a great deal compared to 37% that reported the same for the college.

Students provided many ideas on how the lecture could be expanded or changed to help future marketing graduates in their overall understanding of inclusivity. Common themes included incorporating more conversations like the one in this course throughout the university, talking about this issue sooner (adding it to courses earlier in the curriculum), continued discussion of the topic along with new updates, incorporating more examples and current events, and several stated that they felt all races should be included in the lecture discussion – Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans (Table 3). The author agrees with this feedback. The introductory lecture on this topic was a good start, but inclusivity must include all race/ethnicities in future discussions on this topic.

A few of the more poignant comments were:

Table 4- How the Lecture Could be Expanded or Changed to Help Future Marketing Graduates in Their Overall Understanding of Inclusivity

Respondent	Response
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7	I think the lecture was great all in all. I think the lecture addressed not everything but gave a good amount of information about inclusivity in minority groups. The only thing I would add in maybe for a discussion point is asking students how they can include inclusivity in their everyday life or in their career.
12	There can be real life practices, like in the groups. Teachers should encourage inclusivity in the groups, so some students don't feel left out. Having more discussions like the one we had in class would also be helpful.
18	I think all races should be included in the lecture discussion. Hispanics Asians, and Native Americans should all be included and be talked about.
19	Keep updating the content, show changes – good and bad. Maybe discuss more businesses said one thing but made no changes.

Overall, many students in the course felt the University and the Business College addressed the topic of inclusivity as good (3) or higher on a five-point scale ranging from excellent (5) to poor (1). The University received higher marks than the Business College. 86% of students said the University addressed the topic of inclusivity as good or higher compared to 80% of the Business College. The University also received no poor rating while two students rated the Business College as poor in addressing the topic of inclusivity.

Students provided many responses to the question ‘What do you think the Business College could do differently to improve what they are already doing in inclusivity in the classroom. More notable responses included that the Business College should include an inclusivity section in most classes, professors should feel more comfortable discussing these issues in the classroom, and not saving the topic of ethics for the very end of the course as it is likely to feel rushed or final topics can sometimes be cut from the exam. In addition, students stated they want everyone to feel comfortable and treated fairly, and this includes group projects. A few asked that students are not permitted to pick their own group partners to further promote inclusivity. This was a topic addressed in the literature review as well.

Other ideas were provided on what the Business College could do differently in inclusivity in its student orgs and the College’s Lecture Series. Key responses in this area included ensuring everyone is represented in the Lecture Series, hosting organization workshops for inclusivity and inclusivity panel discussions.

The final question asked students what the Business College could do differently to improve on what they are already doing in inclusivity on their social media platforms and other marketing (Table 4). Key responses on this question ranged from highlighting acts of inclusivity to allowing different organizations, faculty/staff/students of all race/ethnicities/gender take over the Business College’s social media platforms for a day and celebrate national/international holidays/students/traditions.

A few of the more meaningful comments were:

Table 5- What the Business College Could Do Differently to Improve on What They Are Already Doing in the Area of Inclusivity on Their Social Media Platforms and Other Marketing

Respondent	Response
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11	I think they should bring more light as to what's going on around the world on their social media platforms regarding inclusivity.
16	I think they should promote any and all organizations in the College of Business. They should promote equally as well. I think they should share goals of the organizations to promote inclusivity on social media platforms as well.
23	Talk more about what the school is doing to promote inclusion. Add more bios on successful minorities within different departments.
31	I know they are working on updating their social media, so they could do something about highlight all races and genders of students and staff on their social media. For example, highlight more black students / staff for Black History Month. They could highlight a student / staff / alumni for each day of the month. The same for Women's History Month. They could also include any international holidays, students, and traditions on it.
37	Highlight acts of inclusivity. If the school wants to lead by example, it must show those examples.

Conclusion

The survey confirmed there is a strong tie between diversity and inclusivity, in addition when students think about inclusivity, they also associate this term with equality. When reflecting on inclusivity, students closely associated this term with their work experience and experiences at the university and within the classroom.

The survey also confirmed that many in a university setting are responsible for inclusivity but particularly important are the students themselves and the professors in their day-to-day role in the classroom. This finding reinforced several findings in the literature review by researchers.

Based on the results of this survey, upper-level business courses were more likely to include the topic of diversity than lower-level courses in the program, and even more striking, all core courses for the marketing major received the highest number of responses in support of inclusivity. The special topic lecture on inclusivity had a considerable effect in furthering the students understanding of inclusivity. Ideas provided by the students to expand the lecture should be carefully considered and further developed.

Additional ideas for furthering understanding of inclusivity in the Business College, student organizations within the Business School and the Business School's social media platforms were also provided. Overall, the University and the Business College received good reviews for their handling of inclusivity, but more work can be done.

Additional plans include a culminating project for this course that directly benefits minority-based businesses in the region. Students will provide an integrated marketing plan with strategic solutions and creatives to help the small business that in turn could be used as part of the small business' marketing effort. Marketing creatives will include a combination of traditional marketing, social media, public relations, and event-based ideas the company can implement to grow their business within the next year. All companies to benefit from the project will come from the Small Business Supplier Diversity Agency's all-inclusive list of firms. The Directory includes SWaM and DBE-certified firms.

Future research on this topic could further explore student perceptions of inclusivity over time. This study could also be expanded to include students in entry level courses in the business program along with those in the capstone course. Additional studies might also include faculty in the Business College to measure their inclusion of Inclusivity in the curriculum and noting any differences between entry and upper-level courses in the program.

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