# Passing the Baton: Extending the Power of FLCs Through a Newly Inducted Criminal Justice Learning Community

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Natasha N. Johnson[1]
Andrew Young School of Policy Studies
Department of Criminal Justice & Criminology
Georgia State University
55 Park Place NE, Suite 506
Atlanta, GA 30303
Phone: (404) 860-3272
Email: njohnson93@gsu.edu

Thaddeus L. Johnson
Andrew Young School of Policy Studies
Department of Criminal Justice & Criminology
Georgia State University
55 Park Place NE, Suite 506
Atlanta, GA 30303
Phone: (404) 413-1020
Email: tjohnson230@gsu.edu

[1] Direct all correspondence to Natasha N. Johnson, Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Department of Criminal Justice & Criminology Georgia State University, 55 Park Place NE, Suite 506, Atlanta, GA 30303. Email: njohnson93@gsu.edu.

**Abstract**

Revamping educational methodologies and programming to incorporate a variety of perspectives is crucial for catering to a diverse range of learners. This article presents the development of an inclusive and culturally responsive Sophomore Learning Community (SLC) approach that integrates the principles of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning. Scholarly research and corresponding interventions have primarily centered on ensuring student persistence from the first to second year despite first- and second-year college students exhibiting similar attrition rates. To fill this gap, SLC builds on the success of our Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC)-Freshman Learning Community (FLC), which was evaluated positively in terms of student engagement, retention, and performance, providing a promising foundation for the SLC's potential success. SLC aims to support second-year criminal justice (CJ) majors through a cohort-based pedagogical model to enhance student engagement and preparation for life beyond undergraduate studies. This manuscript discusses the development and evolution of the cohort-based approach and its advantages for the field of Criminal Justice and other disciplines.

**Keywords**

Criminal Justice Learning Community; Freshman Learning Community; Scholarship of Teaching and Learning; Sophomore Learning Community; Student Engagement; Writing Across the Curriculum

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## Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a noticeable increase in racial and cultural diversity among postsecondary student bodies in the United States (Glenn, 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). However, despite this growth, many educational institutions still rely on traditional, single-track pedagogical approaches that are incongruous with the evolving campus demographics. Such socio-culturally unresponsive teaching methods have the potential to undermine inclusivity in the classroom, thereby jeopardizing students' academic success. Moreover, if culturally responsive teaching is not genuinely implemented, the significance of culture is devalued, and the consequences of racism are disregarded and dismissed (Freire, 2000; Kozol, 1992; Love, 2019). Therefore, revamping educational methodologies and programming to incorporate a variety of perspectives concerning subject matter, teaching techniques, and evaluation tools across all disciplines is crucial to cater to the needs of a diverse range of learners.

This more inclusive approach holds particular importance in the realm of Criminal Justice and Criminology, especially given the overrepresentation of non-White individuals in the criminal legal system. Nevertheless, Black and other minoritized students continue to be educated by instructors and systems that lack the essential skills to prepare course content and deliver lessons that comprehensively center the intricacies and complexities associated with non-White communities. This point is not an indictment of educators, as the responsibility of equipping potential teachers with the necessary resources to create all-encompassing learning settings lies largely with institutional leaders (Collins, 1991; N. N. Johnson, 2018, 2021).

Some colleges and universities have taken up the gauntlet of enhancing academic achievement and retention via comprehensive, program-based learning communities, particularly for first-year college students (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Kyndt, Coertjens, Van Daal, Donche, Gijbels, & Van Petegem, 2015; Xerri, Radford, & Shacklock, 2018). This educational model, which is cohort-based and revolves around thematic foci, block scheduling, and faculty collaboration, strives to assist new college students in their transition to campus life and integrate varied perspectives and experiences into the academic process (Kuh, 2006; Kuh, Hayek, Carini, Ouimet, Gonyea, & Kennedy, 2001; Zhang, Xia, Fan, & Zhu, 2016). The positive outcomes of these studies indicate that students who participate in such learning communities show increased participation in extracurricular activities (Hotchkiss, Moore, & Pitts, 2006), exhibit superior academic performance (Mansfield, 2004), and tend to earn higher grade point averages (GPAs) (Mansfield, 2004).

While first- and second-year college students exhibit similar attrition rates (Hayes, Whalen, & Cannon, 2008), scholarly research and corresponding interventions have primarily centered on ensuring student persistence from the first to second year (National Resource Center for The First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2014). This approach has led to a reduced emphasis on sophomore success and related programming within academic and university contexts. The failure to carefully evaluate and consider the challenges and experiences faced by this group hinders institutions' ability to address potential achievement and retention gaps, particularly for underrepresented students.

This paper aims to enhance the knowledge base on student learning communities and showcase the benefits of implementing this approach for second-year college students. Before

delving into the overall framework and process of the Criminal Justice Learning Community approach, we elaborate on the importance of promoting diversity and inclusivity through curriculum and pedagogical transformation. Additionally, we discuss how the support and involvement of the department and institution influence the efficacy of this endeavor. Following a discussion of the internal mechanisms and outcomes of the Sophomore Learning Community (SLC) initiative at an R1 academic institution in the Southeastern United States, we conclude with implications and recommendations for further research and practical applications.

**Fostering Diversity and Inclusion: Equity Matters**

Curriculum transformation has historically been relegated to offices of 'Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion,' 'Minority Affairs,' and the like. Coincidentally, teaching, learning, and transformation centers have become more directly connected to equity- and inclusivity-specific work. Recently, these centers have been leading the way, offering guidance in pedagogy, inclusive teaching, and other evidence-based best practices[2]. As academic units work together to blend curriculum transformation with varying needs and levels of understanding, individual professors may differ in their comfort level when discussing equity and inclusion or connecting these elements to their course content and topics.

A growing number of academic institutions are passing school-wide competency agendas targeting inclusivity, equity, and the residual effects of longstanding inequities large-scale. Dr. India Ornelas, Assistant Professor of Health Services and Chair of the School of Public

[2] Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning & Online Education

Health Diversity Committee, when asked to reflect on a workshop challenging participants to undo institutional racism, noted that:

> Many began looking critically at the school's curriculum…passing the new core competency was a collaborative effort involving many meetings, presentations, and informal conversations to communicate the importance of the proposed addition. The first result was a one-credit course that addresses the effects of race, power, and privilege on public health — which remains popular, with a wait list every quarter. Soon, it became clear that a greater commitment was needed as Public Health students in the course advocated that the concepts in the class were equally vital to the school's broader curriculum. (University of Washington, 2022, p. 1)

Further, multiple committees vetted several draft proposals of the new competency, and the process mandated stakeholder involvement at every level. In a coordinated leadership effort, the school-wide Diversity Committee and Curriculum Committee worked together for the first time. Said Dr. Orelus, "The big leap was going from something that was voluntary…to having all degree plans required to meet this competency" (University of Washington, 2022, p. 1). Connectedly, scholars in this arena concur that there are various ways to enact real change on macro and systemic levels. Evidenced in numerous settings and contexts, open communication and mutual respect remain key ingredients (Daly, 2006; R. DuFour, R. B. DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Gump, 2007).

**Revamping Education Methodologies: First-Generation Students**

First-generation and underrepresented students of diverse backgrounds face unique challenges in higher education. Studies highlight that these students come from various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, with a substantial proportion being labeled "underrepresented" and "minority," among others (Hernandez, Reitzel, & Leal, 2019; Romero, Miotto, Casillas, & Sanford, 2020). The social, financial, academic, and cultural challenges they face frequently lead to lower self-esteem and higher stress, placing these students at a greater

risk of dropping out (Ko, Bartoszuk, Peek, & Hurley, 2023). However, their first-gen identity also serves as a source of motivation that helps foster skills like self-reliance (Silver, 2023).

Research emphasizes the importance of institutional support, cultural awareness, and collaborative leadership in enhancing first-generation, underrepresented students' academic and social success (Hernandez et al., 2019). Understanding these students' experiences and needs is crucial for promoting their retention and success in higher education (Salusky, Monjaras-Gaytan, Ulerio, Forbes, Perron, & Raposa, 2022). Learning communities are particularly beneficial for aiding first-generation students in acclimating to college life by providing structured support, fostering community building, and offering guidance in navigating academics and campus experiences. By connecting students with shared experiences, the sense of belonging cultivated within these communities ultimately improves retention and success for these students (Azpeitia et al., 2023; López, Santelices, & Taveras, 2023). Therefore, colleges and universities must iteratively find effective ways to revamp and advance education methodologies to support students from diverse backgrounds, including first-generation students. Key strategies include integrating technology like online learning platforms and virtual classrooms and implementing student-centric approaches.

**Curriculum Transformation: Diversity + Inclusion + Pedagogy**

Through their collaborative efforts, Kennedy et al. (2021) formed faculty professional development groups to focus on curriculum transformation via inclusive pedagogy, equity awareness, and community-building. The authors, a team of ten, were trained in DEI awareness, teamwork, and backward course design. Due to their iterative implementations and reflections, they saw direct impacts of the importance of inclusive pedagogies and were active

in embedding diversity and equity awareness throughout their curricula. They spoke of increased intentionality and strengthened relationships with their students as they adapted course curricula and structure to be more inclusive. This work included ensuring equitable access to course materials, providing extensions as needed, providing thorough, timely feedback and a variety of ways to demonstrate learning, and recognizing their students as whole people in and out of the classroom. The faculty noted the importance of identifying and breaking down biases and committed to ongoing training in backward course design and inclusive pedagogy. Admitting that changing culture can be slow-moving, they realized that full inclusion requires an "all-in" level of dedication from all community members.

Two essential questions to ask, say Danowitz and Tuitt (2011), are (1) "What is my responsibility as a teacher related to teaching in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of my students?" and (2) "What are my students' responsibilities related to engaging in education as a practice of freedom?" (p. 49). Another way to think about this conversation was to imagine what bell hooks would say if we were to ask her to describe her vision of a teaching and learning environment that provided students with a first-rate, highly rigorous, and transformative education. In the effort to promote inclusivity through engaged pedagogy, we must understand that education as the practice of freedom requires that students, faculty, and institutional leaders "resist the temptation to fall back into traditional ways of teaching and find the courage to embrace change and learn without any limits" (Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011, p. 53).

Moreover, Arday, Zoe Belluigi, and Thomas (2021) declare that a collective and concerted effort is necessary to redesign curricula to provide something that engages learners inclusively. These differing histories are required to navigate a genuinely multicultural, global

society successfully. They posit that disrupting the status quo regarding inequality and discrimination within the academy requires mobilization. The cohesiveness of such resistance is predicated on a sound rationale for developing a curriculum that allows students to engage with various perspectives. They state that "historically, senior leaders within universities have been complicit in suppressing and ignoring calls for a more diverse curriculum, with action now only occurring because of the exerted pressure to do so by social movements and campaigns" (p. 310). In that same vein, Langdon (2013) reminds us that the mobilization of social and structural change seldom happens throughout history without activism and advocacy. For us, this includes garnering buy-in from all invested parties.

**Earning departmental Buy-in = Open Communication**

Earning departmental buy-in is essential to whole-scale curricular transformation. Garnering this buy-in begins with listening, educating, and asking the right questions. It is of the utmost importance that shareholders are invited to the table at the onset of any mission. In this way, people are brought together from the very beginning, garnering the whole community's support from day one. Consistent with similar macro-level efforts, we sought and received varying levels of approval, first from the CJC (Criminal Justice and Criminology) Department Chair to begin the application process, then from the Center for Excellence in Teaching, Learning, and Online Education (CETLOE) as we moved forward with the application process. We completed a Faculty Teaching Fellowship application in Spring 2020 and received notification that we were awarded this fellowship during the Summer 2020 semester. Next, we secured approval from departmental-level faculty as we constructed and updated relevant pedagogy to align with our course and curricular goals. To that end, we revamped the signatory

CJLC course, CRJU 2010 (Proseminar in Criminal Justice), during the Fall 2020 semester. CJC departmental faculty voted to approve these revisions at the end of Fall 2020. Lastly, we garnered the support of the dean of our respective school, renewing funding through year two (Fall 2021-Summer 2022) to launch our newly inducted program. We crossed – and passed – all of these tiers as we worked to move the needle on this initiative; by way of these levels of communication, we worked through all issues that arose in real-time.

All the while, our own work was and continues to be led by the following guiding questions: (1) "How can we increase and improve access for our native students?", (2) "How do we, then, work to accommodate our incoming transfer students?", and (3) "How will we know our efforts are working, and how will we measure student success?" Regardless of the environment, issues of access persist in the academic sphere. Recognizing that social systems of inequity generated by power and privilege seek to undermine progress (Collins, 1991; Pease, 2021), we continued with the support and backing of our constituency's internal and external members. In addition, regularly updating our stakeholders ensures that trust is built and the flow of communication remains transparent (Lederman, 2020; Nora, Barlow, & Crisp, 2005).

## Passing the Baton: Extending the power of FLCs through a newly inducted Criminal Justice Learning Community

### Background

Incorporating the guiding principles of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, this project is the development of a discipline-specific Sophomore Learning Community (SLC). Built around a cohort-based pedagogical model, the Freshman Learning Community (FLC)[3] combines

[3] Freshman & Transfer Student Learning Communities

faculty collaboration and block scheduling to ease the transition into the first-year college experience. To move the needle forward, we established a criminal justice-based SLC. This revamped cohort-based model enhances outcomes among two groups of criminal justice majors: second-year native students who have successfully completed a CJ-taught FLC and transfer students arriving to the department with an Associate of Arts (AA) degree.

The CJC department experimented with a WAC (Writing Across the Curriculum)--enhanced FLC program in the early 2000s. A published evaluation of the program (Dabney, Green, & Topalli, 2006) demonstrated positive outcomes in student engagement, retention, and performance. To advance this mission, we designed course content to orient students to the CJ major, enhance their connections to the faculty and the discipline, provide remedial support in social science writing and statistics, and serve as a first step in the college-to-career progression. Our goals include exposing students to department policies and support programs, introducing them to faculty members, and preparing them for the job and graduate school prospects that follow.

We committed to replicating and extending this evaluation and dissemination effort based on the relaunch of the newly inducted program, our Criminal Justice Learning Community. GPA and retention data were regularly collected for each student in the CJLC cohort and measured against sophomore criminal justice majors not participating in a learning community (Carroll, Coston, Maness, & Cooper, 2020). All students enrolled in the courses listed above were assessed on their program satisfaction and engagement to facilitate the comparison of matched sections of SLC cohort members and non-cohort majors on these measures using the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (Kuh et al., 2001). The

sections below detail our processes, findings, implications, and future research and practice recommendations.

**Description of the Criminal Justice Learning Community – Spring 2020 – Present**

With the support of the University Faculty Teaching Fellowship under the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), we collaborated with CETLOE. Modeled after the Freshman Learning Community (FLC) program (Dabney et al., 2006), the Sophomore Learning Community (SLC) program draws upon a cohort model to foster student belonging, connections to the university, and student success. Further, we aim to enhance outcomes among two specific groups of CJ majors: second-year native CJ and Perimeter College transfers arriving on the downtown campus with an AA degree. At the core of the program is the new course, Proseminar in Criminal Justice. The goal, again, is to serve as a viable first step in CJ students' college-to-career progression. The Proseminar in CJ course is a valuable second-year extension for native students who participated in the FLC program. Importantly, it serves as a vital orientation and remediation course for transfer students so that they continue to keep pace with the rigors of a research university program.

The complete CJLC program was designed in 2020 as a collaborative pedagogy initiative (CPI) involving two full-time CJC faculty members and one Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA). Beginning in the Fall 2021 semester, the three CPI members staff the CJ-taught FLC courses for first-year native students. Each Fall semester, these shareholders staff sections of Proseminar in CJ (CRJU 2010), Ethics in CJ (CRJU 3060), and Research Methods in CJ (CRJU 3020). During the Spring semesters, the two CJC faculty members teach Law, Justice & Social Change (CRJU 4720), and Statistical Analyses in CJ (CRJU 3610), with the GTA offering additional course-specific

support. In the Summer semesters, all CPI members collaborate to create and implement cross-section assignments designed to enhance critical thinking, writing, and oral communication skills.

**Primary Outcomes of the Faculty Teaching and Learning Community (Faculty-TaLC)**

One requirement for being a CETLOE Teaching Fellow is facilitating a Faculty Teaching and Learning Community (Faculty-TaLC). A Faculty-TaLC is a specifically structured community of practice that includes the key goals of building community, engaging in scholarly (evidenced-based) teaching, and developing the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (Cox & Richlin, 2004). Armed with this information, we began developing our Faculty-TaLC, *Sophomore Learning Communities*, in the Fall 2020 semester. The two faculty CPIs collaborated monthly to design the following template for our SLC CETLOE Faculty Teaching & Learning Community:

> Welcome, stakeholders! This Faculty-TaLC focuses on developing a Sophomore Learning Community (SLC) program. Modeled after the Freshman Learning Community program, the SLC program draws upon a cohort model to foster student belonging, connections to the university, and student success. The sophomore year creates some unique challenges that, for many, result in student regression. The driving goal behind major-specific SLCs is to improve student outcomes and reduce the likelihood of this regression. The signatory major-specific Proseminar course (CRJU 2010) will serve as a valuable second-year extension for native students who participated in the FLC program, and, importantly, it will serve as a vital orientation and remediation course for first-year transfer students who historically struggle to keep pace with the rigors of a research university. The content of the course is designed to orient students to their

major, enhance their connections to the faculty and the discipline, provide remedial support in social science writing and statistics, and serve as a first step in the college-to-career progression.[4]

Participants signed up via Microsoft Forms; sessions were held throughout the Spring 2021 semester, during which we co-facilitated the following four sessions from January-April (on the last Thursday of each month):

***Topic I: Goals and learning outcomes of SLC programs – January 2021***

- Identifying the need/gap for incoming first-year and transfer students,
- Sophomore slum literature and the transition from the 1st to 2nd year,
- Development of the newly created, major-specific Proseminar course, CRJU 2010, as a response to this,
- Positioning the course as a natural, seamless segue,
- Overall goals in response to the sophomore slum and all students who can benefit from this extra level of support and engagement,
- Highlighting our own experiences, how this/could/would have benefitted us, and the importance of paying it forward,
- SLCs send a message of caring and investment, and
- Moving the conversation forward: Designing a major-specific Proseminar SLC Course.

***Topic II: Designing a major-specific Proseminar SLC Course – February 2021***

- Recap previous session (i.e., identifying the need/gap for incoming first-year and transfer students; highlighting the 'sophomore slump' literature & the transition from the 1st to 2nd year. What do we *actually* know?
- Recap our 'why': (1) SLCs send a message of caring and investment; (2) Overall goals include responding to the sophomore slump and providing access to all students who can benefit from this extra level of support & engagement,
- At the core of this is our development of CRJU 2010, a newly created, major-specific Proseminar course, positioned as a natural progression from Freshman to Sophomore year and as a seamless segue for students who historically struggle to keep pace with the rigors of a research university program,
- Sharing the content we developed for the CRJU 2010 syllabus and chronologically detailing the process(es) we underwent (including receiving both departmental. & school-level approval) en route to the course going 'live' during the Fall 2021 semester and

[4] Sophomore Learning Communities Example Sign-up Form

- Moving the conversation forward: Student retention, filling classes, and ensuring proper sequencing.

***Topic III: Student retention, filling courses, and ensuring proper sequencing – March 2021***

- Moving the Needle Forward – Part I:
- Ensuring proper sequencing,
- Filling Courses – Two groups – Sophomores and transfer students,
- Student Retention – Requirement of a two-semester commitment, and
- Moving the conversation forward: Measuring the efficacy of the SLC program.

***Topic IV: Measuring the efficacy of the SLC program – April 2021***

- Moving the Needle Forward – Part II:
- Our Progress: Recruitment – Direct email, Following up re: more information, Securing commitments, Registration process, etcetera,
- Student Retention Challenges: Filling courses and safeguarding proper sequencing,
- After all is said and done, does it work?: Evaluating the effectiveness of the SLC (i.e., GPAs, National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), Student feedback and assessment, control and focus groups, etcetera), and
- Whatever it takes: Focusing on quality teaching requires strong professional learning communities. Collegial interchange, not isolation, must be the norm for teachers.

These themes coalesced in the Summer of 2021 as we iteratively developed the program's keystone course, CRJU 2010 Proseminar in Criminal Justice. We also fine-tuned our research and evaluation plans and established concrete project timelines. In conjunction with matched funding from the Criminal Justice and Criminology Department, the fellowship award supported summer stipends for co-faculty-led development and funding for our graduate teaching assistant; HEERF[5]/CARES Act[6] funding supported the continuance of our work post-year one. The following section highlights our general takeaways over two academic years associated with our CJ-specific Sophomore Learning Community project.

[5] U.S. Department of Education Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund

[6] U.S. Dept. of Ed. CARES Act: Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund

**Primary Outcomes of the Sophomore/Criminal Justice Learning Community Project**

Over the course of the Spring 2021 and Summer 2021 semesters, we set out to elicit student participation in the Criminal Justice Learning Community using the following tailored correspondence:

> Dear CJ student,
> You are receiving this email because records indicate that you are a returning second-year or incoming transfer student with Criminal Justice as a designated major. As a faculty member in the Department of Criminal Justice, I am writing you today to bring to your attention an innovative program designed to better connect you socially to your fellow criminal justice majors and enhance your likelihood of academic success. Modeled after the highly successful university-wide Freshman Learning Community (FLC) program, the Sophomore Learning Community (SLC) program is directed exclusively to CJ majors. As a lower-classman or transfer student, you will likely find it difficult to gain access to high-demand classes or put together a schedule that meets your ideal time needs. Signing up for the SLC program works around this hurdle by assuring you enrollment in a set number of low enrollment classes (capped at 30) that meet in a user-friendly format. More importantly, class content includes modules and faculty collaboration aimed at providing students with an orientation to the department faculty, introduces you to critical policies and procedures, and affords you a ready-made cohort of study partners and potential friends.

Furthermore, we outline, in detail, what registered students are to expect below:

> Here is how the program works: A cohort of 30 students is enrolled in pre-determined classes during the Fall and Spring semesters. The centerpiece of the SLC is the Proseminar in Criminal Justice (CRJU 2010) course offered each Fall semester. This substantive class provides a survey-level introduction to the criminal justice system (police, courts & corrections). The SLC section of this course, specifically, includes modules designed to introduce students to department policies and resources while at the same time exposing them to local practitioners and career resources. Unlike the 1010 class in the FLC program, this class counts toward your degree requirements under Area F of the curriculum. SLC students also take Ethics in CJ (CRJU 3060) and Research Methods in CJ (CRJU 3020) in the Fall term. These rigorous classes in a cohort model and from professors working collaboratively as a team will improve grades and learning outcomes. In the Spring, SLC students will be automatically enrolled in Law, Justice & Social Change (CRJU 4720) and Statistical Analysis in Criminal Justice (CRJU 3610). Students will take these courses with the same two faculty CPIs; both classes count toward graduation, will be afforded the same team-based approach from instructors, and will benefit from a cohort enrollment model.

Tying everything together in a summative fashion, we concluded with the following:

> All SLC classes are taught by full-time CJ faculty and are arranged in a user-friendly schedule (see attached flyer). Scheduling of all SLC classes is done centrally by the department, but students are free to round out the remainder of their schedules as they choose. Students must sign up for the SLC in the department's main office or by way of a reply email (be sure to include your Student ID#). You are also welcome to contact us for more information.

Aligned with our goals and connected to our outreach efforts, the following section highlights our general takeaways over two academic years associated with the development (year one) and manifestation (year two) of our newly CJ-specific Sophomore Learning Community project.

## Program Induction Takeaways

### Faculty Teaching and Learning Community (TaLC) Takeaways

CETLOE's Faculty Teaching & Learning Communities[7] connect academics with similar interests who participate at the forefront of educational discussions at the university. TaLC members jointly develop community goals and meet monthly throughout a given semester. This commitment to a collaborative experience has meant that the pros associated with our Faculty-TaLC far outweigh any cons. The opportunity to engage, align, and collaborate with like-minded faculty across disciplines is always a plus. Through this experience, we found numerous benefits to connecting with faculty across all campuses, including creating new cross-curricular and cross-campus connections. While our work is both CJ and SLC-specific, we continue to support all efforts to develop, establish, and solidify support networks and communities of this nature. The sections below highlight our takeaways, next steps, implications, and recommendations for future research and practice.

[7] Faculty Teaching & Learning Communities

**Criminal Justice Learning Community (CJLC) Takeaways**

The Fall 2024-Summer 2025 academic year marks the 5th year of the existence of our CJLC program. As such, we unpack our takeaways over four years on the five core CJLC courses [Proseminar in CJ (CRJU 2010), Ethics in CJ (CRJU 3060), Research Methods in CJ (CRJU 3020), Law, Justice & Social Change (CRJU 4720), and Statistical Analyses in CJ (CRJU 3610)][8] below:

***Proseminar in CJ (CRJU 2010).*** Relaunched in Fall 2021, Proseminar in Criminal Justice (CRJU 2010) is the first of the five main courses comprising the CJLC program. The proseminar is part of the CJ SLC initiative and is restricted to concurrent majors enrolled in the cohort-based registration model. The course content is designed to introduce students to the fundamentals of the study of criminal justice. Through this experience, students build the necessary competencies to become successful criminal justice majors. They learn how to source and document scholarly sources, analyze and construct arguments, identify and evaluate hidden assumptions, apply critical thinking to solve complex, real-world challenges, and develop the skills to become effective written and oral communicators.

***Ethics in CJ (CRJU 3060).*** Ethical Issues in Criminal Justice (CRJU 3060) examines philosophical theories underlying ethics and how they relate to law enforcement, courts, corrections, law, criminal justice research, and principles of justice. This course is one of two Critical Thinking through Writing (CTW) courses that all Criminal Justice majors must successfully pass to graduate [*the other CTW course is Internship/Field Experience in Criminal Justice (CRJU 4935)*].

***Research Methods in CJ (CRJU 3020).*** Research Methods in Criminal Justice (CRJU 3020) introduces social science research methods as they apply to criminal justice and how to

[8] Department of Criminal Justice and Criminology Catalog

evaluate and conduct research in the study of crime and criminal justice problems. The course introduces students to the tools and vocabulary of the scientific method. Various data collection techniques used in criminological and criminal justice research are explored and critiqued both methodologically and ethically. Students learn how to critically assess the quality of research products, their contribution to criminal justice and criminology, and how to develop and evaluate their research problems.

***Law, Justice & Social Change (CRJU 4720).*** Law, Justice, and Social Change (CRJU 4720) examines how the criminal justice system responds to family violence. In addition to addressing the causes and consequences of family violence, specific attention is given to different forms of family violence (child abuse, sibling abuse, partner violence, and elder abuse) as well as how the criminal justice system (police, courts, probation, corrections, and parole) responds to each of these types of violence. The types of policies used to prevent family violence and intervene in these cases are also examined.

***Statistical Analyses in CJ (CRJU 3610).*** Statistical Analysis in Criminal Justice (CRJU 3610) introduces essential statistical tools used to generate information in the criminal justice field. The course focuses on calculating various univariate, bivariate, and inferential statistics. The appropriate uses and the meaning of these statistics are also emphasized.

During the Fall semesters, the two faculty CPIs teach CRJU 3060 and CRJU 3020, and our GTA is the CRJU 2010 instructor. In the Spring, the faculty CPIs teach CRJU 4720 and CRJU 3610. With intentionality as our focus, we combined these five courses to provide our second-year CJ students with a rigorous, fully immersive, and engagement-centered experience (T. Banks et al., 2020; Nora et al., 2005). Modeled after a block-scheduling model, students enrolled in the CJLC

program take all five courses sequentially as a cohort. This extension of the FLC provides students with an additional year of support and community-building in a structured and supportive environment (Cox & Richlin, 2004; Felten, 2013). With community building and fostering diversity and inclusion through curriculum transformation as our objective, we highlight our Criminal Justice Learning Community student takeaways in the section below.

**Criminal Justice Learning Community (CJLC) Student Takeaways**

A necessary component of our work is the examination of students' perceptions of the Criminal Justice Learning Community. Similar to research by Craig, Nodeland, Long, and Spivey, 2020), we focused on team-building and community interwoven throughout the five core CJLC courses. Over the implementation year beginning Fall 2021 and ending Summer 2022, our results indicated that overall, the students had positive perceptions of this collaborative approach and preferred learning in a focused, controlled, and intentionally constructed environment. Consistent with prior research, a positive relationship exists between student engagement and increased academic success (Craig et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2016). Findings of this nature, in general, indicate that Learning Communities (LCs) increase student engagement and knowledge acquisition (Gebauer, Watterson, Malm, Filling-Brown, & Cordes, 2013; Webb & Cotton, 2019). Given that effective implementation of LCs relies heavily on the merits of teamwork, Craig et al. (2020) maintain that:

> Students are able to practice this important skill that most, if not all, jobs require. As students must engage in critical thinking and problem-solving within their team to problem-solve, these are all valuable experiences they will be able to draw upon in their future careers (p. 385).

Further, aligned with these positive trends, students are also likely to acquire valuable skills that will be useful in their future workplaces (E. E. Virtue, Wells, & A. D. Virtue, 2017; Vuong, Brown-Welty, & Tracz, 2010).

Guided by these foci, we found that students thoroughly appreciated the opportunity to participate in a cohort-based community, particularly during their second year. Most participants were sophomore students, but some juniors and seniors enrolled simply because they needed to take the select courses anyway and wanted the benefit of doing so as members of a cohort. At the conclusion of the Spring 2022 semester, one student, a sophomore, said this about her time in the Criminal Justice Learning Community: “Thank you for being an amazing professor! Thank you for not making my life harder and for being accessible in and outside of the classroom. You’re one of the best [this university] has to offer! Never forget it!” Another sophomore CJLC member said: “I thoroughly enjoyed having you as a professor and felt as if I excelled in [this program] as compared to my other courses last semester.” A senior, also a member of the CJLC, said:

> I can honestly say that your class had to be one of my favorites this past semester because it not only challenged me to develop a better understanding of ethics and how it applies to criminal justice professions, but I also gained valuable insight into policing with the discussions we had in class. Because of your class, I can now give the basic definition of utilitarianism without even thinking about it!

Several other students spoke of the advantages, including collaboration and building lasting relationships, of participating in the inaugural CJLC. In addition to our work in the classroom, we continued our outreach throughout the Spring and Summer 2022, 2023, and 2024 semesters, with prospective students expressing interest in joining and taking it upon themselves to sign up for the Fall 2022-Summer 2023, Fall 2023-Summer 2024, and Fall 2024-Summer 2025

cohorts. In this same vein and understanding that this is – and remains – an iterative process, we outline our goals and next steps in the sections below.

## CJLC Next Steps

### CJC Sophomore Learning Community (SLC) HEERF/CARES-funded initiatives

Since the origination of this program in 2020, we have continually discussed the merits of launching a sophomore learning community in CJC, a department where enrollment is rapidly growing. In the pandemic and post-pandemic environment, we believed it would be particularly beneficial to students who suffered isolation and academic challenges. So, we implemented the CJ-specific SLC in 2021 with the following overarching goals:

- Create a community of CJC students in their sophomore year in a cohort model that will provide focused faculty attention to improved academic performance (including individualized study sessions to remediate extant academic performance issues from the Fall 2021-present),
- Launch a new proseminar course that is WAC-identified, which will also serve as a remediation course for students due to the intentionally small class size,
- Evaluate the impact of the SLC on student outcomes by student characteristics (including student performance during the pandemic), and
- Ongoing internal updates and check-ins—As part of a university-wide initiative, our school supports the CJC SLC's path to permanence.

### *CJC SLC Statistics Mini-camp*

Many of our students, across disciplines, struggle with statistics at the undergraduate level. Pre-COVID, we planned to develop an in-person three-day mini-camp. Due to COVID, we quickly restructured the mini-camp into an online-friendly program. We implemented this mini-camp with the following goals:

- Assess the impact of the online Summer version(s) of the mini-camp on outcomes in statistics-oriented courses in CJC during the Fall and Spring semesters,
- Revise the mini-camp curriculum appropriately and offer it in an online format AND an in-person format,

- Evaluate the impact of the two modalities on student success at the 3000 level, and
- Revise again in subsequent Spring semesters for a permanent implementation, with ongoing revisitations beginning in Summer 2022.

***CJC SLC Writing/Study Skills Camp***

CJC has been exploring a Writing Camp, a potential game-changer, to serve as a place where students can hone their critical thinking and writing skills. We believe the pandemic made this a priority as students transitioned from heavy reliance on technology to directing their own thinking and writing processes (metacognition) in the online space. We launched this experimental camp in the Summer 2022 semester, and based on the evaluated impacts, we are excited to offer it each semester. The goals of this mini-camp are as follows:

- Access the impact of the online Summer 2022 version of the writing/study skills camp on outcomes in WAC-oriented courses in CJC during the Fall and Spring semesters,
- Revise the writing/study skills camp curriculum appropriately and offer it in an online format AND an in-person format,
- Evaluate the impact of the two modalities on student success at the 3000 or junior level, and
- Revise again in subsequent Spring semesters for a permanent implementation, with ongoing revisitations beginning in the Summer of 2023.

According to Ambe (2006),

> Pedagogical approaches must be reconceptualized in terms of curricula, course content, evaluations, relationships, and other aspects that take into consideration multiple and diverse perceptions. These transformative practices will foster multicultural appreciation in pre-service teachers and help them develop the cultural competencies necessary to effectively meet the needs of all learners in school environments that are constantly changing. Once this is achieved, all students in all schools and grade levels, from Kindergarten to the completion of doctoral degrees, will learn in all disciplines, the values, and contributions of all people in the evolution of our world (J. A. Banks, 1997; Clark, 1999; Nieto, 2000; Sleeter, 1996). They will appreciate themselves and each other more, thus transforming their interactions with other members of the global community in more positive ways. (p. 698)

In response to this call, we lay out the implications of our CJLC program and recommendations for future research and practice in the following sections. We are dedicated to revising again in subsequent Spring semesters for a permanent implementation, with ongoing revisitations beginning in the Summer of 2023. This commitment to continuous improvement is crucial for the success of the camp. We will consistently evaluate the impact of the camp on student success at the 3000 or junior level, ensuring that we are always on the right track.

## CJLC Program Implications

To effectively evaluate course syllabi, J. Lane and Waldron (2021) in *Fostering Equity, Diversity, and Cultures of Inclusiveness Through Curricular Development* offer educators the following adaptable Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) rubric as a guide to establishing effective program evaluation scales (see Figure 1 below):

***[Insert Figure 1 – Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Rubric – About Here]***[9]

The second year of college is a crucial and often misunderstood period in students' academic journey. It presents a different and sometimes more challenging transition than the first year (Gebauer et al., 2013; E. E. Virtue et al., 2017; Vuong et al., 2010; Webb & Cotton, 2019). As one sophomore at a southeastern US University aptly described, “Your freshman year—it’s not that you were babied, but it’s like there were so many things that were reaching out to freshmen that you come back your sophomore year and it’s just like you are on your own” (Gahagan & Stuart Hunter, 2006, p. 17). While there is less empirical evidence about the challenges faced by

[9] Lane, J., & Waldron, I. (2021). Fostering Equity, Diversity, and Cultures of Inclusiveness Through Curricular Development. *Journal of Nursing Education, 60*(11), 614-617. DOI: 10.3928/01484834-20210913-02

sophomores compared to first-year students, a growing body of research suggests that educators should pay more attention to this population's developmental needs.

Attending to what is under our control, we continued working with University-level registration advisors to align and create CJLC pipelines. We encountered some need for more consistency across the board, with some advisors directing students to refrain from enrolling in such rigorous courses early in their academic careers. A handful of advisors, for example, expressed to students that taking statistics was yet to be in their best interests, emphasizing the challenges of the course. We imagine, however, that these measures only scared a few students away from enrollment. Due to the multiple channels of communication between university- and department-level advising, coupled with some student turnover, we will continue to ensure that we remain communicative with scheduling advisement.

Maintaining momentum is important; as such, we created a series of flyers to get the word out across campus and to capture – and recapture – initial student interest. Lastly, we identified the need to connect with our *Academic Innovation and Strategy* constituents to stay abreast regarding the most recent departmental admits. We proceed with the understanding that the second-year experience holds unique challenges for students and academic institutions alike (Gahagan & Stuart Hunter, 2006, 2010). Considering this, Burge (2023), Fletcher Jr and Haynes (2020), Gebauer et al. (2013), Pendakur (2023), E. E. Virtue et al. (2017), Vuong et al. (2010), Webb and Cotton (2019), and other experts in this arena offer the following six recommendations to help guide institutions in moving toward a more inclusive, positive, and productive experience for sophomore-level students:

1. Pay attention to second-year students. A task force or committee representing a wide range of campus constituents should be appointed to understand the second-year student

experience, examine sophomore retention rates, and evaluate institutional support structures for sophomores;
2. Create sophomore-appropriate services, programs, and curricula. The issues sophomores face are unique to that population and should be addressed in offerings that connect to these students' specific needs as well as to the institutional mission, values, and goals;
3. Design first-year experience offerings with the recognition that they should be extended to the second year. Academic, social, and personal support and opportunities for student involvement remain vital aspects of student retention throughout college and should be central to students' experiences in their second year. Engagement may be particularly critical between the well-supported first year and the closely watched junior and senior years;
4. Modify existing programs and services designed to support student learning and engagement for sophomore students. These may include such practices as undergraduate research, study abroad, service learning, curricular learning communities, academic advising and career development, and academic success services;
5. Create institutional traditions for sophomores, such as sophomore retreats, ring ceremonies, second-year summits, or other special sophomore events; and
6. Develop an institutional culture that welcomes evaluation and assessment. Build processes for determining the effectiveness of new programmatic initiatives early in their inception and create mechanisms for disseminating results throughout the campus. (Burge, 2023; Fletcher Jr & Haynes, 2020; Pendakur, 2023)

Furthermore, to increase transparency, working groups – ours included – should have a combination of faculty members, students, and administrators within the apropos university and department, focusing independently on students, faculty, and curricular needs. Practical, in this regard, is the working group's role in evaluating syllabi and determining how curricular content fosters equity, diversity, and a culture and climate of inclusiveness (Clark, 1999, 2002; M. D. Johnson, Margell, Goldenberg, Palomera, & Sprowles, 2023). In an ongoing fashion, our working group will continue to employ rubrics that provide a consistent and articulable approach to evaluating and revising related course syllabi.

## Program Takeaways: Successes and Areas in Need of Improvement

The positive impact of first-year learning communities on student outcomes and retention is well-documented, with benefits extending into the second and third years, as

illustrated by prior research (M. D. Johnson et al., 2023). However, the benefits in terms of grades may wane over time, while retention and graduation rates can persist, albeit with a slight narrowing of equity gaps (E. E. Virtue, Maddox, & Pfaff, 2019). Additionally, learning communities designed for first-generation students have successfully enhanced academic success and social integration, providing valuable insights for ongoing improvement and guidance for similar programs at other institutions (Markle & Stelzriede, 2020). Incorporating reflective writing projects within learning communities can further support students in navigating the challenges of transitioning into college, fostering community building, and aiding students in making sense of their college experiences (Culver, Swanson, Hallett, & Kezar, 2021). Thus, with these principles in mind, we speak to the following successes and areas needing improvement (below).

**Program Successes and Areas in Need of Improvement**

As previously mentioned, we prioritized what was under our control as we worked with university-level registration advisors to align and create CJLC pipelines. A major roadblock we encountered was a need for more consistency across the board, with some advisors directing students not to enroll in such rigorous courses early in their academic careers. A handful of advisors, for example, expressed to students that taking statistics was yet to be in their best interests, emphasizing the rigor of the course. This mixed messaging presented an early challenge for us. We imagined that these measures might deter a few students from enrolling, and we were right. Surprisingly, it may have made our courses more appealing to certain students. Several upper-level students – juniors and seniors – who decided to join the CJ stats cohort expressed they were drawn by the prospect of completing the course alongside like-

minded peers. Thus, due to the multiple and inconsistent channels of communication between university- and department-level advising, coupled with some student turnover, we will continue to ensure that we remain communicative with scheduling advisement.

Despite our efforts to include diverse fundamental perspectives to accommodate a broad range of learners, our work and approach were specifically tailored for Criminal Justice majors. Most academic research and interventions focus on supporting student persistence from the first to the second year, even though the attrition rates for first- and second-year college students are similar. This gap among CJ students initially motivated us to address the issue. We found that students across various spaces (e.g., criminal justice, pre-law, political science, and computer science majors) valued being part of this community and evaluated it positively regarding student engagement, retention, and performance. Nonetheless, there is a need for continued expansion of this and other similar programs. We would like to see students from all majors benefit from being part of a high-yield, high-supporting learning community. Considering this, we offer the following recommendations for future research and practice.

## Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Partnering for inclusivity and curriculum transformation (University of Washington Information School, 2022) means consistently attending to these three key details:

1. ***Getting all stakeholders on the same page:*** Schedule time for people to connect before the quarter and organize activities to introduce concepts of microaggressions and privilege. Doing so helps everyone develop a shared understanding and common ground, even if participants have been through the program before. Then, instructors meet with their partners to examine how syllabi, course content, pedagogy, assignments, and evaluation can be more inclusive. Together, they create an action plan and discuss potential challenges and opportunities.
2. ***Offering regular feedback:*** Observe the faculty twice, near the beginning and end of each quarter, and sometimes, if appropriate, participate in class (with instructor agreement). Throughout the quarter, partners are available to answer questions or discuss emerging

situations. “If something happens in a class, the partners already have context,” says del Rosario, and together with the faculty member, they can discuss issues that arise. A consistent partnership means “if something happens in a class, the partners already have context.”

3. ***Reflecting on lessons learned:*** At the end of each quarter, partners and instructors discuss lessons learned. They can base their reflections on developed guidelines while emphasizing flexibility and freedom. Asserts UWIS shareholders, “We say: ‘Do it how it’s going to work for you.’ It is not about what it looks like on paper, but about how the partners can best work together to create a learning environment that engages diversity and fosters inclusive thinking.” (p. 2)

We acknowledge that cultural shifts cannot and will not occur overnight (R. DuFour, 2004). Thus, future research should continue focusing on supporting professional learning communities (R. DuFour et al., 2004; Mintz, 2019), heeding the voices and needs of our students and communities (Daly, 2006), and above all, getting and keeping all shareholders on common ground (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007; R. DuFour & Eaker, 2009; National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2003).

## Conclusion

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many academics found themselves “left to absorb and negotiate waves of constantly changing government instructions blended in the online world with disinformation and fearmongering, while still attempting to pursue the exchange and expansion of teaching content” (Tabane, Diale, Mawela, & Zengele, 2023, p. 1). Thus, developing sound and inclusive curricula while focusing on wellness and the constituency’s needs are all being considered in expansive and forward-thinking ways. In the wake of COVID-19, responsible curriculum transformation includes offering revamped, integrated, and user-friendly classroom instruction models (Tabane et al., 2023). An emphasis on fostering diversity and inclusion through curriculum transformation allows instructors to reimagine teaching and

instruction and revision transformation – in this era – through innovative, emergent, and critical lenses.

We are committed to the precept that diversity and educational excellence go hand in hand. We surmise that diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential drivers of institutional greatness that can accelerate our capacity and ability to foster diversity and inclusion with curriculum transformation as the vehicle. Excellence in the context of criminal justice refers to high-quality research, teaching, and service, an engaged and active culture, a culturally responsive climate, and a focus on community outreach. Central to our mission of fostering inclusion is the active involvement of all stakeholders. This includes students, faculty, and staff, who are all integral to our community. We strive to ensure that each member experiences a genuine sense of belonging, engagement, and achievement, thereby contributing to the overall success of our institution.

Providing leadership, guidance, and support across the school to conceptualize, define, assess, and nurture the climate required for diversity, inclusion, and excellence to thrive is necessary (Carroll et al., 2020; N. N. Johnson, 2018, 2021). It means addressing faculty, staff, and student diversity issues from within. It involves working closely with department chairs, unit leaders, and senior administration to develop robust school-wide diversity and inclusive excellence strategic plans. In this way, shareholders help position diversity and inclusion as fundamental to the mission to provide a solid education, principled leadership, and a stable community (Nieto, 2000).

Our commitment to advancing DEIJ work is not a one-time effort but a continuous journey. It must be proactive, continuous, and led through a transformative lens. This ongoing

endeavor involves outreach (e.g., TaLCs) and service-learning (e.g., LCs) that address the academic needs of a diverse and pluralistic constituency. Importantly, it means supporting efforts (ours included) to build, recruit, train, and retain a more diverse, initiative-taking, and progressive citizenry and workforce by fostering diversity and inclusion through curriculum transformation.

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**Figure 1**

TABLE A. EDI Rubric

| | Transformative | Developing | Emerging | Neutral | Unsatisfactory |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Inclusion of Diverse Populations | Course is **universally designed**; content comprehensively integrates diverse populations, is inclusive of gender, race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, cultures, age, religion, etc., and examines how these identities operate in intersection. | Course is **inclusive** of diverse populations; content meaningfully reflects diverse populations and introduces the concept of intersectionality but diversity is not fully integrated and content does not examine how identities operate in intersection. | Course is **amenable** to diversity; course content demonstrates some inclusion of diverse populations but is presented in relation to dominant populations; identities are presented as if they operate in isolation from one another. | Course **does not** address diversity; content on diverse populations is absent from the syllabus. | Course content is outdated and/or reproduces harmful stereotypes about diverse populations and/or presents monolithic conceptualizations of historically underrepresented groups. |
| Appreciation of Sociohistorical Context | Course content conceptualizes individuals in relation to their broader social context; historical events are recognized as **significant** in shaping current conditions and how marginalized groups and individuals experience **various social structures, including health, education, employment, housing, public infrastructure, environment**, etc. | Course content conceptualizes individuals in relation to their broader social context; historical events are recognized as **contributing** factors in shaping current conditions but the impact of various social structures on marginalized groups and individuals are left in abstraction (i.e., specific examples are absent from the course materials). | Course content conceptualizes individuals in relation to their broader social context but historical events are **minimized** in terms of their significance in shaping current conditions and how marginalized groups and individuals experience various social structures. | Course content conceptualizes individuals in relation to individual circumstances and does not address historical events as shaping the ways that marginalized groups and individuals experience various social structures. | Course content conceptualizes individuals as responsible for their experiences with various social structures; historical events are not presented in relation to the ways that marginalized groups and individuals experience various social structures. |
| Situation of Sociopolitical Activism within the Nursing Scope of Practice | Nursing practice is positioned as a moral endeavor that is grounded in sociopolitical activism; the social contract between the nursing profession and society to uphold justice is made clear in course materials with **specific examples**. | Nursing practice is positioned in such a way that the **impact** of social institutions on the nurse-patient relationship is established but course materials do not fully illustrate how justice is upheld by the social contract between the nursing profession and society (i.e., specific examples are not provided). | Nursing practice is positioned in such a way that the **link** between social institutions and the nurse-patient relationship is established but their impact is not made clear in course materials and social justice is presented as an abstract concept in relation to the nursing profession. | Nursing practice is positioned in such a way that social institutions are recognized as influencing the nurse-patient relationship but only in abstraction. The social contract between nurses and society is **not** established in course content. | The nurse-patient relationship is positioned in such a way that nursing practice is **not** established in relation to social institutions. The social contract between nurses and society is reduced to interpersonal interactions. |
| Application of Structural Competency | Course content critiques health systems in such a way that **power relationships are a central focus**; barriers to the delivery of quality care are related to dominant cultures, beliefs, values, and ways of knowing that operate within the health care system and are situated within broader social contexts whereby other systems, including education, | Course content identifies power relationships as having an influence on delivering quality care to diverse populations. Health, education, employment, housing, and other systems of oppression are **not** critiqued in such a way | Course content identifies a need to consider the influence of power relationships when delivering care to diverse populations but **the focus is on interpersonal interactions**, not systems of oppression. Learners are given knowledge | The focus on interpersonal interactions in the course content **diminishes the influence of power differentials** when diverse populations access systems of oppression. Learners are given | Course content promotes oversimplified, essentialist, and/or reductive understandings of how various social structures impact diverse populations. Learners are given knowledge that |

Figure 1: *Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Rubric*