

Moving the Needle: Early Findings on Faculty Approaches to Integrating  
Culturally Competent Pedagogy into Educational Spaces

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### **Abstract**

This article summarizes findings from a qualitative study conducted with faculty and administrators in public affairs programs at four U.S. higher education institutions—two in urban planning and two in public administration—regarding the integration of culturally relevant pedagogy within their degree programs, colleges, and universities. Other studies have examined the prevalence and effectiveness of cultural competency (CC) curriculum and the role diversity plays for students and faculty in achieving a meaningful CC education. This study focused specifically on faculty and administrator perspectives on the experience of conceiving, planning, and implementing measures to integrate CC into their teaching. The authors' early findings show that teaching students to be aware of their own bias, integrating hands-on coursework, and requiring diversity curriculum offered strategies for building CC among students. However, barriers to teaching CC in higher education public affairs programs continue to exist in large part because of a lack of diversity and shared values, lack of institutional support, and a fractured system of teaching and administration devoid of a shared vision. The authors also found preliminary evidence that informs strategies for developing cohesive systems of support for building culturally competent environments in higher education public affairs programs.

*Keywords:* public administration, urban planning, cultural competency, pedagogy, interviews, faculty, education, public affairs

Significant changes in U.S. demographics have been accompanied by equally substantial social tensions. In the context of societal change, it is important to respond to the needs of diverse populations effectively; however, proof of the failure to address discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, and immigration status is starkly evident in America's urban landscape. Diverse populations—including people with disabilities, women, LGBTQ individuals, to mention a few—are disproportionately affected by displacement pressures, violence, criminalization, environmental injustice, the lack of economic development, and so on. Yet, public affairs professionals are supposed to ensure public safety and health for everyone. Indeed, the leadership of public affairs professionals is necessary today and in the future to create opportunities for residents through economic development, affordable housing, transportation, and education.

Chun and Evans (2016) maintained that cultural competency (CC) education provides students with an advantage in interacting with a multicultural world because they are trained to look beyond differences and “transform collective experiences into a mutually reinforcing vision of reality” (p. 139). As such, future practitioners require high-level skills in recognizing and understanding the realities and needs of various groups and communities (Lung-Amam, Harwood, Sandoval, & Sen, 2015). More specifically, an increasingly diverse society requires public affairs practitioners to effectively impart the social values of equity in service delivery and policy implementation (Rice, 2007).

As they prepare current and future generations of public administrators and urban planners in public affairs programs in higher education institutions play a vital role in affirming the need for CC as a core skill. Research has demonstrated strongly that a CC curriculum is an effective mainstay in other public-oriented disciplines such as social work and public health (see illustrative literature in Abrams, 2009; Doutrich & Storey, 2004; Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). However, comparatively less research has explored how public affairs disciplines—specifically urban planning and public administration—integrate CC into educational programming in day-to-day classroom settings.

The exploratory research presented in this article used qualitative interview data from 24 faculty and administrators in urban planning and public administration programs at four universities. A vast amount of data was collected about: (1) specific teaching practices, (2) resources relevant to building and implementing pedagogy, (3) perceived opportunities and barriers to advancing diversity and inclusion, (4) campus climate, and (5) how faculty and administrators define and understand the value of CC. All of these factors, combined with data about institutional type, campus climate, and other macro-level realities presented rich insights. However, given that this was our first exploratory step into understanding the complex landscape of culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum, we bound

our initial analysis to focus on the following research questions: (1) How do public affairs faculty teach CC and how do personal factors inform these approaches? (2) What challenges do faculty and administrators face in integrating culturally relevant pedagogy into educational spaces? We emphasized the role of individual elements because they significantly drive how faculty perceive and value CC. Overall, we did not aim to offer definitive conclusions about faculty pedagogy decisions and actions. Instead, we started with an illustrative approach resulting in culled themes from the qualitative data.

In this article, we define CC and how it has been approached in public affairs education. We then describe the study context and methodology, followed by a discussion of the findings, including respondents' various definitions and perceived value of CC, pedagogy approaches, and challenges faced by faculty integrating CC into curriculum. We conclude with a consideration of next steps and future research around public affairs pedagogy.

### **Toward a Definition of Cultural Competency**

To lay the groundwork for this article, we must first define cultural competency. Rice (2007) defined the terms *culture* and *competency* separately. He defined culture as the various ways that shape how individuals see and interact with the world around them. Culture influences family and societal values, attitudes, and perceptions about how individuals should interact appropriately with society. Furthermore, it may be affected by educational attainment, gender, sex, socioeconomic status, religion, ethnicity, age, and other factors (Rice, 2007). Rice defined competence as the knowledge, skills, and abilities that enable a person to function effectively in particular settings. Rice (2007), drawing on the research of other scholars, including Cross et al. (1989), characterized CC as “a practice ... [that] stresses operating effectively in different cultural contexts and providing services that reflect the different cultural influences of constituents or clients” (p. 625).

Cross, Bazron, Dennis, and Isaacs (1989) defined CC as a “set of cultural behaviors and attitudes integrated into the practice methods of a system, agency, or its professionals that enables them to work effectively in cross-cultural settings” (p. 7). They also established a CC continuum for use in the nursing and healthcare professions. This continuum consists of six levels of competency ranging from cultural destructiveness to cultural proficiency in individuals (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989; Rice, 2007) and has been adopted as a conceptual framework by other professions such as social work and public administration.

In more recent years, scholars have expanded the definition of CC to include concepts such as ethnic competence, cultural humility, and cultural sensitivity, for instance Tervalon & Murray-García (1998) and Angotti, Pierre-Louis,

Ramasubramanian, Shipp, and Tovar (2011) defined CC as “the understanding and acceptance of the beliefs and values of others, as well as the demonstrated skills necessary to work with and serve diverse individuals and groups” (p. 23). Further, Rice and Matthews (2012) maintained that CC frameworks must integrate and transform cultural awareness and cultural knowledge about individuals and groups into culturally specific skills, practices, standards, and policies to increase the quality and effectiveness of public services and programs.

Using these definitions as guides, our work is informed by the following three key aspects of cultural competency: (1) knowledge of specific cultural norms and values; (2) knowledge of how cultural dynamics impact the way people navigate the places in which they live, work, learn, and play; and (3) awareness of how cultural hierarchies can contribute systematically to patterned social outcomes.

### **Cultural Competency in Public Affairs Curriculum**

Rice and Matthews (2012) argued that there is little integration of CC in higher education public affairs programs; that is, CC training does not go far enough in addressing issues of inequity due to a lack of program implementation in the classroom as well as in the field. Baum (1997) echoed this critique, asserting that while CC is widely discussed in the classroom, students are given few opportunities to apply CC skills in the field. The concept of CC, however, is intrinsic to the practice of public affairs. Thus, many scholars have attempted to develop various approaches to embedding the concept of cultural diversity in public affairs curriculum (Baum, 1997; Forsyth, 1995; Sweet & Etienne, 2011; Thomas, 1996). Generally, U. S. public affairs schools have adopted three such approaches by offering students: (1) a specialized course on diversity; (2) one or more specialized courses on diversity while integrating issues of diversity throughout the curriculum; and/or (3) no specialized course but integrating diversity throughout the curriculum (Sen, 2005).

The accreditation guidelines established by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA)—which necessitate the demonstration of diversity in public administration programs—have led many researchers to examine the diversity of public affairs curricula (Gooden, Evans, & Pang, 2018; Johnson & Rivera, 2015; Lopez-Littleton & Blessett, 2015; Mayhew & Grunwald, 2006; Rice, 2004; White, 2004). For instance, White (2004) analyzed the diversity in curricula of the 20 top-ranked master of public affairs programs and found that fewer than half of the programs offered students core courses related to diversity or cultural competency. Within these programs, courses typically covered race, ethnicity, and gender, with little attention given to other areas like sexual orientation, age, religion, and disability (White, 2004). Similarly, Carrizales and College (2010) found that the application of CC within public affairs curricula was substandard since the component of diversity represented a minimal part of courses

rather than an entire course. Yet, a review of the public affairs curricula at 50 NASPAA-accredited program by Hewins-Maroney and Williams (2007) noted that the majority of public affairs programs recognized the importance of cultural diversity in preparing students. Likewise, Lopez-Littleton and Blessett's (2015) diversity and inclusiveness framework (DIF) offers a multifaceted approach to guiding public administration programs in developing CC curricula. However, CC within public affairs is relatively overlooked in scholarship (Hewins-Maroney & Williams, 2007), a scarcity that ultimately affects teaching practice and the effective competency of professionals in the field of public affairs (Rice, 2004).

### **Barriers to Integrating Cultural Competency in Curriculum**

In this section, we focus on the obstacles that impede the integration of CC into the educational environment. Among numerous existing challenges relates to students' perceptions of the educational climate itself. Rice (2004) identified the inclusion of a diverse student body in public affairs programs as an asset to teaching and learning in a culturally competent environment that promotes CC in its educational model. Barriers to student inclusion and success, therefore, can also act as a barrier to integrating culturally competent curriculum into public affairs programs. This is one of the most fundamental obstacles as it affects the incorporation of diversity in the university curriculum (Bennett, 1995; Rice, 2004; Wei, Ku, & Liao, 2011). According to Bennett (1995), the perception of the university as an inclusive environment is essential to the persistence of minority students in higher education. An adverse and unsupportive university climate hinders the adjustment of students from different cultural backgrounds and acts as a barrier to faculty attempting to incorporate the concept of CC in the curriculum.

Although NASPAA mandates adoption of diversity in public affairs curriculum (Wyatt-Nichol, Brown, & Haynes, 2011; Rice, 2004; White, 2004), an institution's attitude toward and priorities for diversity impact the effective curricular integration of cultural diversity. Mayhew and Grunwald (2006) explored two primary factors that deter faculty from including diversity in their curriculum: (1) goal incongruence and (2) perceived ineffectiveness of adding diversity. The authors asserted that if the perceived academic climate in a department is supportive of diversity, individual faculty will be more likely to incorporate diversity into their course materials; conversely, if the perceived climate is unsupportive, then faculty will tend not to support diversity in the curriculum (Mayhew & Grunwald, 2006). De Gaetano and España (2010) investigated best practices for building cultural competence in faculty and students. Their findings suggested that educators who have strong interactions with culturally diverse students develop greater cultural and racial awareness and are therefore better able to reflect and teach critically diverse course content.

Another recurring challenge in integrating diversity is the shortage of relevant resources, and admission processes that can act as barriers to inclusion. According to Rice (2004, 2017), the consideration of culture and CC in public affairs in the United States is lacking for two reasons: “First, the traditional study and practice of public administration and public service delivery considers cultural variation as invisible and illegitimate, and second, a focus on cultural differences does not fit the traditional equality principles advocated in textbooks” (Rice, 2007, p. 44). Because of such institutional and philosophical barriers, cultural diversity and competency are neither salient nor prioritized in the curriculum content of the public affairs field (Svara & Brunet, 2004). Additionally, effective teaching of diversity and CC in different areas depends on the existence of diverse faculty who are receptive to diversity in the curriculum and who possess the technical and pedagogical ability to deliver content (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Rice, 2004).

### **Study Context and Methodology**

The research discussed in this article was part of a larger mixed-methods, multi-site, longitudinal study from 2016 to 2020 designed to evaluate the effectiveness of CC pedagogy as well as the factors that influence the ability of faculty and administrators to effectively integrate CC pedagogy into their courses. We are conducting this research in four different public administration and urban planning programs at California State University, Los Angeles (CSU-LA), New Mexico State University (NMSU) in Los Cruces, Florida State University (FSU) in Tallahassee, and the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. The commonalities and variations among these universities along environmental, geographic, disciplinary, and institutional lines provide an exciting context for comparing processes for the larger study.

### **Multiple Case Study Methodology**

Our research employs a multiple case study approach across the four institutions. We chose case study methodology because we sought to understand the decisions that faculty and administrators make around the creation and implementation of CC pedagogical changes in institutions. We believe that the processes involved include not only creating curriculum but also promoting and supporting effective curriculum for teaching and preparing public affairs professionals in the context of different institutions. A case study methodology supports such an approach (Yin, 2003).

In this article we aim to describe experiences implementing pedagogical goals that have been identified as critical imperatives in the literature related to public management as well as in other public service orientations such as social work or health fields. We believe that a more in-depth investigation into the quality of implementation will provide more precise insight into the distance between CC

planning and the actual effectiveness of those programs. The quality of execution comprises several factors, including a range of knowledge, decisions, practices, and experiences of individuals. More precisely, the effectiveness of culturally relevant pedagogy relies on the preparation of the institutions and instructors, student readiness, and resistance (Abrams & Moio, 2009).

Several prior studies have described a lack of effectiveness in teaching and learning cultural competency in higher education. Many programs tout the inclusion of diversity and diversity-related topics in higher education, but closer examination reveals a lack of specific information, poor integration of full diversity, and resistance to full implementation of CC curriculum (Julia, 2000; Williams, 2006). We found a compelling comparison between the studies conducted by Hewins-Maroney and Williams (2007) and Sabharwal, Jijal-Moghrabi, and Royster (2014). As described by the latter, the Hewins-Maroney and Williams study seemed to reveal that diversity topics and curriculum related to diversity and CC were present in the public affairs pedagogy of 50 NASPAA-accredited schools. However, Sabharwal, Hijal-Moghrabi, and Royster examined the preparedness of curricula and syllabi of core courses in the same 50 public administration programs and found inadequacies in the process of implementing culturally relevant pedagogy.

An important discovery made by Sabhrwal et al. (2014) was that many master of public administration (MPA) programs have varying definitions of the basic concepts that underlie cultural competence as well as varying depths in their delivery of CC curriculum. The study also revealed different levels of understanding of diversity and inclusion, ideology, and commitment to CC. Sabhrwal et al.'s investigation demonstrates that the process of delivering effective CC education is not related solely to the inclusion of diversity topics (in multiple variations). A more elaborate study of such varied levels of values and experiences will tell a more detailed story of the process of envisioning and ultimately implementing rigorous programs inclusive of CC pedagogy.

Prior studies have also shown that merely adding an elective or a unit related to diversity topics is a common response to meeting NASPAA's accreditation requirements for diversity (Sabarhwal et al., 2014). Yet, achieving effectiveness in CC education is a far more complex undertaking that involves the preparation of faculty, the inclusion of various forms of diversity, and the incorporation of activities and communication among students (Lee & Green, 2003). However, our multiple case study suggests that the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches to CC may also depend on the context within which the program is delivered.

Our study helps to explain the complexity of the process of delivering effective CC curriculum and explores the quality of experience in light of



inconsistencies in defining and valuing the specific programming required to teach public administrators to be culturally competent in a progressively diverse society.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

We use several complementary data collection strategies in our research, including online pre-curriculum and post-curriculum surveys targeting current degree-seeking public affairs students from each institution and in-depth interviews with faculty and administrators. For this article, we focus on one of these strategies: 24 in-depth interviews with faculty and administrators across the four universities. Research team members at each institution recruited faculty and administrators within public affairs colleges and departments, as well as academic program and center directors. We also utilized snowball techniques to develop a diverse sample of respondents. Interviewees comprised faculty and administrators engaged explicitly in teaching, research, or program efforts around diversity and CC, as well as those not involved with diversity and inclusion efforts within their institutions. Overall, the interviewees included four tenure-track professors, eight tenured professors, and 12 administrators. Eight females and 16 males comprised the participant pool. Eighteen participants identified as White, three were Asian, two were Latino, and one was Black. The interviews were designed to solicit participants' responses about effective teaching practices, conditions and capacities for supporting productive learning environments, CC education, and program implementation in higher education institutions.

Researchers developed separate interview guides for faculty and administrators. The guides asked questions about personal background and academic preparation, definitions of CC, experience using the curriculum to address issues of CC, pedagogical strategies, institutional support, and challenges related to implementing CC in their disciplines. Four researchers, one from each institution, conducted the interviews between January 2018 and March 2018. We conducted interviews via Zoom video or audio, and each interview, which ranged from 30-45 minutes, was recorded and transcribed. Coding of the qualitative data was both inductive and strategic. We identified natural themes in the interview data to categorize the activities, challenges, and successes described by the interviewees. Also, in an attempt to connect the participants' experiences to the experiences of faculty and administrators in other settings, we chose to synthesize thematic outcomes in the qualitative data. We conducted an iterative coding process that included developing four descriptive codes and 73 interpretive codes. To ensure greater reliability, two researchers conducted the coding. Thus, naturalistic interpretations and strategic outcomes from the data represent the basis for coding expectations (Creswell, 2009), and the analyses of the data represent the context and experience of the interviewees.

### **Case Background**

Examining the factors that may influence the ability of faculty and administrators to integrate CC into their courses across four different institutions offers a useful opportunity to explore variations in the process along multiple lines. There are three critical differences across the four institutions: population served, location and surrounding community, and institution type. Both CSU-LA and NMSU are Hispanic-serving institutions (HSI), and Florida State University and the University of Utah are predominantly White institutions (PWI). Based on previous research on the importance of student diversity to the incorporation of CC curriculum, the diversity of the student population may impact how students receive and process the implemented curriculum based on peer interactions. It may also be an essential factor in understanding institutional attitudes toward programs that promote diversity among faculty. However, we will not discuss this aspect in this article; later research will delve deeper into the potential role of institution type in creating and implementing CC pedagogy.

The demographics of each institution's surrounding community also differ. Both CSU-LA's and NMSU's student demographic characteristics are also closely aligned with those of their surrounding areas. Los Angeles has a racial makeup that is primarily non-White Hispanic (48.6%), White (28.5%), and Black (9%), and CSU-LA's student population is non-White Hispanic (62%), White (8%), and Black (4%). Los Cruces is predominantly non-White Hispanic (58.1%), White (35.1%), and Black (2.3%), and NMSU's student population is non-White Hispanic (53.9%), White (29.4%), and Black (3%). Additionally, Florida State University is located in Tallahassee, where the racial/ethnic makeup is primarily White (57.5%), Black (30.7%) and non-White Hispanic (6.1%) respectively. In stark contrast, Salt Lake City, home to the University of Utah, remains overwhelmingly White (77.5%). The four institutions also represent a mix of research and teaching concentrations. CSU-LA is a comprehensive university (with an emphasis on teaching), while NMSU is a community-engaged institution with a focus on teaching and research. FSU and the University of Utah are both Research 1 institutions, where the primary focus is on research. These differences among the institutions may be relevant to understanding the factors that influence the ability of faculty to engage in a curriculum that integrates CC. While this article does not focus specifically on variations in institutional context, this is certainly an important consideration for next steps in our larger research project.

### **Limitations**

While our study sample included a diverse range of faculty and administrators, it was small; therefore, our findings are not representative or generalizable to other institutions. The majority of our interviewees were men (outnumbering females by 200%), and 75% of the interviewees were White. We did not account for the sexual orientation or gender identity of participants. The

interviewees, at times, discussed the quality of their experiences through the lens of their demographic identity. However, generalizations cannot be made about different types of faculty or administrators based on the experiences of the participants as members of particular demographic identities.

The research activity described in this article represents a portion of our larger, triangulated study on pedagogical strategies for CC in public affairs education. The complete design includes testing the efficacy of curriculum on students, following the experience of faculty in the development and teaching of a CC curriculum in different university environments, and testing the experience of teaching strategies and specific curricula in the classroom. Yet, this article describes a vital part of our research, which strives to understand challenges and successes in the experience of faculty and students already engaged in the implementation of CC pedagogy.

## Findings

### Defining Cultural Competency and its Perceived Value

We started the interviews by asking respondents to define CC, since their definition of the might also drive their realistic approach to teaching it. While most respondents could explain a practical application of CC, very few articulated a definition. Faculty members tended to think of CC in terms of practical applications to teaching. However, interviewees were consistent in affirming the positive returns and necessity of CC. Some respondents conflated CC with diversity and pluralism, while others made distinctions among these concepts, but most expressed an awareness of the behaviors and skills associated with it:

- To be honest, I don't think about it. I mean, I don't think of it in terms of cultural competency. I really just think in terms of exposure and ... identifying the other. So, to me, I think cultural competency is the notion that you can speak across identities, and still find common ground to an extent.
- Can you teach cultural competency without saying the words *cultural competency*? So, in the urban design classes we have opportunities for comparative work all the time and the negotiation of other cultures [...] So they get different perspectives.

Administrators tended to conceive of CC in the context of faculty or student diversity or the implementation of culturally relevant activities or events. Administrators also discussed CC in relation to behaviors in diverse environments centering on an appreciation for diversity or an authentic ability to communicate and empathize across cultures:

Cultural competency in the broadest terms represents an ability to both understand, work with and contribute to a community that is composed of different identities ... someone who demonstrates a cultural competency, I could be able to help Black students, Chicano students, Asian-American students, thrive at [this institution] given those are the major populations of our community.

The cultural demographics of institutions did not seem to be relevant to administrators' or faculty's definition or understanding of cultural competence.

### **Value of Cultural Competence**

Overall, interviewees viewed CC as a vital component of enriched experiences in the university and beyond. Faculty articulated the importance of CC for students. As one interviewee shared,

Our planning professionals are in communities that are diverse, where they're going to have to be dealing with different people, different cultures. And so they need to know how to go out and interact with them ... and facilitate effective communication both between the planners and these different multicultural groups, and between the different groups themselves.

In addition, respondents noted CC's value in enabling inclusivity, resulting in higher student success. Faculty interviewees were also asked about the importance and relevance of CC and diversity issues to the field of public affairs. One faculty member noted,

The big debates in public administration for years have centered around expertise versus ... the knowledge of individual citizens and public administration. One of the big critiques over the years has been public administration privileges, expertise over ... the knowledge of citizens and that this isn't necessarily a good thing.

While it may not seem noteworthy to distinguish between broad and specific definitions, the distinction is crucial when attempting to gain a better understanding of the intensity of teaching, supporting, cultivating, measuring, and implementing CC. Additionally, it is important to note the connections among the terms *diversity*, *pluralism*, and *cultural competency* in respondents' definitions. While all three terms share similarities, they do have critical nuanced differences. Whereas diversity and pluralism acknowledge the importance and value of many cultures and groups, CC goes deeper by examining the complex anatomy of cultural identity and how it can sometimes be symbiotic or at odds with a given social context, depending upon explicit and implicit values, norms, and beliefs. Thus, how faculty

and administrators acknowledge this differentiation will influence how they approach advocating for and implementing it.

### **Curriculum and Pedagogy: Practices and Perspectives**

The classroom appears to represent ground zero for building cultural competency in students. It is where students establish close contact with teachers and curriculum and where the ideals and intentions of CC, and the related concepts of diversity and pluralism, come alive and are tested. From the interviewee's responses, a framework emerged regarding how faculty taught students CC. The framework consisted of four salient themes: (1) preparing students to be aware of their own bias, (2) enabling students to push past discomfort to discuss issues related to cultural identity, (3) integrating hands-on coursework, and (4) offering required or dedicated coursework to build CC. Faculty and administrators were asked about what pedagogical tools help to support a constructive learning environment for students. Faculty indicated that peer interaction and dialogue were essential for students to learn about otherness:

- I make that clear on the first day, that you have to have a safe place for conversation about what you're hearing and discovering in this class, because this room is usually 70, 80, 100 people. It's a community that's representative of a whole range of religions, cultural values, economics, and so we're gonna have disagreements, and we're gonna have to find ways to have those conversations.
- The way that I start with ours is always helping people understand privilege. And when they understand their privilege in so many different forms, it opens a lens to understand the complex, integrated ways that the human settlements work.

Faculty noted that creating a space for dialogue to reflect on issues of privilege, identity, and otherness is a particularly important first step for students to engage with their own existing biases. It is also critical for students to become aware of gaps in their knowledge regarding other cultures, as well as understand their own culture in relation to others. Faculty shared that learning from each other's unique lived experiences is a powerful heuristic in learning about CC.

In the interviews, we asked faculty about the teaching approaches and pedagogical techniques they used to integrate CC into the curriculum. Faculty described a variety of educational methods, including dialogue exercises, case studies, comparative work, service learning, journaling, and simulations:

- The class conversations, just because we're such a poor state, I've found different ways to talk about ... and intersectionality has helped a lot. So

how do we talk about White privilege but also how do you explain that to working-class poor Whites. Intersectionality is a good tool for that.

- I try to switch it up in that way to where it is more of a dialogue that we're having, and in that way through those group discussions [and] kind of seminar format, it allows those in-service students to bring their experiences into the classroom. And [it] also help[s] me educate in a very different kind of way. And I find that that's actually probably the most impactful way to communicate the importance of cultural competency and diversity ... by hearing some of the other students that have had personal experiences with the issue itself.
- I'll give you one of my favorites and it always is a home run, okay. So, I was teaching this topic of stereotypes. First ... I give them a piece of paper and I put various, like, I put New Yorkers, I would put gays and lesbians. And the instruction they get is, Whatever comes to your mind, any adjective, and of course, be decent. Whatever comes to mind, just put down. And they're not supposed to put their name, they don't write their name. But I collect everything and I shuffle it and I give it back to them and they do not get their own. And it is amazing because now they get to read somebody else's and what they realize is that we are all guilty of stereotype and it's okay, but just be aware that you're doing that.

The previous comments illustrate strategies faculty used to push students past discomfort and resistance in order to encourage them to discuss and process potentially controversial issues related to cultural identity, particularly those with strong connections to public sector missions. Such strategies require faculty to develop a safe space for students. Faculty also integrate more hands-on work that allows students to see CC in action and to apply it in a context they are likely to encounter as a public-sector professional. Faculty described two specific methods utilized in the classroom:

- As part of that class, students are supposed to do, or have to do, a project in which they do a projection for accounting for population change, and they're supposed to talk with local stakeholders about trends in that community. And I always encourage and work with the student groups to talk with a diversity of stakeholders, and that's—and, diversity, in that case, we're talking gender, race, ethnicity.
- So I usually speak about a lot of the case studies ... I like to show documentaries of populations that they have not seen before, not to generate a stereotype, but just to generate an idea ... What I used to do is have them go out and examine a case study, a real-life planning case study, and to identify various stakeholders, and then go interview the

stakeholder, and then in the class, come and give me a presentation about ... what they could tell, and the dynamics, how are they using values to achieve that end in the planning.

- And the final projects in a lot of the classes that I teach have an element where they actually have to work with an organization on some type of issue. Like, if it's budgeting or something related to public management, usually the final projects partnered them with an organization. And then in that way they learn a lot, more than I could ever teach them just from those experiences. So that's what I want to do more of, is to really bring in folks from the community in terms of nonprofit administrators but also those in the county, the city, the state, you know city planners, things like that because I think that also really helps.

In addition to specific pedagogical approaches, faculty pointed to key factors relevant to the extent to which CC curriculum reaches students. In particular, they identified integration of curriculum across multiple classes and required coursework as significant determinants of how far CC curriculum can go. Central to these considerations are whether students are required to take courses or opt into them, as well as the time allotted within sessions to address CC in addition to other key course topics.

While department, college, and university-wide culture and actions can provide valuable support or pose barriers to implementing CC, it is most critical to understand faculty perspectives on what shapes the everyday classroom experience. That said, while faculty certainly have significant control over how CC and related principles are implemented in the classroom, accreditation requirements from outside entities represent a source of power and support for effecting change. One faculty member suggested that accreditation requirements are a useful tool for spurring action: "Because of NASPAA accreditation requirements ... we are starting to look at developing diversity models to put into our core classes." Another faculty member explained how innovative faculty could inform accreditation standards:

There is a two- or three-year lag between what our progressive faculty are doing and what the ... accreditation principles and the [objectives] and missions of the profession are. Those all lag behind our progressive professor ... So to get to cultural competency on the table, you've got to realize that it's important and realize you're being left behind if you're not dealing with it.

Supportive accreditation standards are essential because policy can facilitate initial action. However, any steps taken to promote culturally relevant pedagogy will need support at multiple levels to stimulate change across institutions. Moreover,

research also suggests that the integration of diversity education into a program should include developing more course offerings and adding courses centering on diversity and cultural competence (Angotti et al., 2011; White, 2004).

Recognizing the need for a CC curriculum is the first stage of implementing the previously mentioned techniques into public affairs programs. According to Norman-Major and Gooden (2014), once the desire for a program is realized, “there are three main steps in building CC into the MPA curriculum. These include establishing learning outcomes, building a framework, and creating specific course activities and assignments.” Public affairs educators struggle with the practice of culturally relevant pedagogy (Agyeman & Erickson, 2012; Nguyen et al., 2006), which is problematic since the majority of public affairs faculty rely on traditional classroom learning styles for teaching the concept of CC (Agyeman, 2003, Sen et al., 2016). White (2004) advocated the integration of field study into programs so that students can practice cultural competence in the community rather than solely discuss the concept in a classroom (Baum, 1997; White, 2004). Internships, studios, and other experiential learning opportunities offered throughout a program also give students the chance to practice their profession.

### **Perspectives on Challenges Integrating Cultural Competence**

Another key driver of our research centers on understanding the challenges faculty face in their efforts to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom. Ultimately, understanding these barriers can help generate recommendations for how institutions can better support faculty. We asked faculty participants to describe the challenges they face on multiple levels—university, college, department, and classroom—in pursuing or integrating culturally relevant pedagogy into their curriculum. The interviews revealed three major challenge areas that were particularly relevant to faculty. These included (1) lack of awareness from colleagues, (2) discomfort or uncertainty despite recognizing the value, (3) lack of institutional support, and (4) lack of shared vision.

**Lack of awareness.** One of the most significant barriers to integrating CC and diversity-related curriculum is the university climate. As noted in the literature, the prioritization of CC in the curriculum remains rare not only due to institutional barriers but because of a lack of awareness and openness among colleagues when such efforts are not deemed to be significant. As one faculty member pointed out, referring to colleagues,

I’ve always kind of gone into environments to try and get people to open their eyes. I believe a lot of it is that people just don’t have eyes to see things, because it’s not been their life experience and they don’t see it. They just don’t see what’s before them.



Others described the disconnection of the academic community from core issues of diversity:

- Until they do understand that they are in this academic community that is too often divorced from the intensities and urgencies of our time, until they become aware of it like we're requesting of our students—and we're hoping to guide our students into understanding—until they do that, it's hopeless.
- I mean especially at this moment in history where we're hopefully at a tipping point on the misogyny piece, understanding little micro-aggressions that we sometimes perpetrate without knowing because of the way we grew up, and once we go, "Aha. Wow. I didn't realize that's the way I grew up," then we can perhaps incrementally get to these moments of equity.

As these comments suggest, a critical component of prioritizing CC is not only breaking down institutional barriers but also self-reflection and a desire to make connections with other faculty and students in ways that value otherness and difference.

Society's increasing political polarization also provides an opportunity for the academy to be at the forefront of confronting issues of inequality and social justice. Moreover, as the United States becomes more diverse, the role of public affairs practitioners as conduits for effectively mediating multicultural and multifaceted environments becomes more critical. Faculty interviewees acknowledged the cost of not engaging in discussions about identity and diversity with students:

I think that could be the worst thing ... that if you don't have that conversation with the students to where they're comfortable talking about issues of identity and diversity in more of ... a conversational ... seminar kind of format, I think it might hurt them long-term in terms of once they officially enter public service. Then they have to have these discussions not in a safe environment—like the classroom is kind of intended to be. Now they're actually thrown into the deep end, and they might not have the tools they need to navigate these different cultural backgrounds.

By avoiding such discussions in the classroom, students are denied an opportunity to explore their identities, privilege, or biases in ways that they can learn and grow from interactions with their peers.

**Discomfort or uncertainty despite recognizing the value.** In addition to institutional barriers and others' lack of awareness of the importance of engaging

in culturally competent pedagogy, another challenge relates to limited representation of diverse faculty members in the academy. Research has suggested that a diversified faculty adds value to the delivery of difficult course content around issues of difference and otherness. In our study, non-minority faculty expressed that integrating culturally relevant pedagogy was especially challenging:

As a heterosexual White male ... most of the time when we're discussing these issues I'm very scared that I'm going to make a mistake. I'm going to unintentionally offend somebody, say the wrong thing. There is a lot of questions that are extremely sensitive that I would like to ask, but it's very rarely where I feel comfortable enough to explore those types of things and will feel good as a strong enough relationship with somebody to really talk about the very sensitive, difficult issues. Most of the time I'm extremely apprehensive.

Another faculty member described the difficulty of engaging in difficult conversations as the only non-minority in a classroom:

I think that's a tough thing in having those conversations. I think that the tough thing is for the person ... facilitating the dialogue at the moment has to be a person ... who can blend back into the wall and let the conversation continue. You can't impose yourself or your values on the conversation, or you can't have it... [T]o me that's really one of the more critical issues, and I think that's just a really hard thing to do.

These comments represent specific and unique instances, and we do not attempt to generalize them. However, it is important to note that because of not having similar shared lived experiences as their minority students, some faculty interviewees were hesitant to engage in challenging discussions of race, class, or ethnicity. Although their intentions were to be careful and not offend students or faculty from diverse backgrounds, their avoidance of these discussions in the classroom left students without an opportunity to explore their identities, privilege, or biases in ways that they could learn and grow from interactions with their peers. This is not an ideal scenario, particularly in public affairs, since most students will likely work in fields that require engagement with the public, which will include a range of identities. Moreover, such spaces offer faculty opportunities to also experience growth and "Aha" moments since learning about others provides insight about perceived and real experiences of otherness.

**Lack of support and shared vision.** In interviews, faculty and administrators illustrated the different ways that universities, colleges, and departments fostered a climate of inclusion and integrated CC into policies as well as the classroom. We asked faculty and administrators to describe existing resources regarding diversity and CC for students and faculty. While faculty and

administrators viewed the university as a critical space for helping students develop CC, they revealed a range of approaches to implementing and normalizing CC on campuses. Some of these methods were cohesive, whereby all levels within the university exhibited intentional practices and policies, and some represented fractured approaches, whereby greater or lesser degrees of intentionality and implementation existed at various levels (e.g., university, college, department, and classroom). One administrator described vital leadership approaches that support greater cohesion:

So for students, I think the university is very actively working and promoting issues of diversity inclusion. I will tell you that our president gave a public statement ... yesterday, and I think one of the very first things he mentioned was the importance of that initiative. So, it was sort of at the top of his list of issues that he's particularly proud of, that he's particularly aggressive in working towards. So, at the student level, I think there's a lot of discussions, there's a lot of attention, and there are dollars flowing in to support ... a more diverse student body, and to support students from traditionally underrepresented groups.

Another administrator explained other methods used to support cohesion:

We rely largely on the university. And so, the university does have a very active office for diversity and equity, and they do offer programs ... in terms of implicit bias. We have done that with staff, by the way. Over the last semester, we've had three trainings for staff right now in regard to kind of implicit bias, by standard of training ... So we've done that with staff. But, in faculty, yeah, we largely rely on the university. And they do have, also, faculty interest groups that run through our center for teaching and learning excellence that have training workshops in terms of how do you begin to address these issues in the classroom. Around here, the language has shifted to, How do you create a brave space?

While their responses were not comprehensive, administrators did convey the importance of upper-level institutional leaders setting the tone by pursuing innovative initiatives and ensuring the availability of key positions and programming for faculty and students. In this vein, a disconnect among university, college, and department-level programming and support systems still sometimes exists. More fractured approaches appear to have less high-level leadership with long-term vision and more champions raising concerns and engaging in separate programming who still need a higher level of support to realize more considerable change. Where gaps between colleges and departments exist, different smaller programming or university centers or institutes are critical resources. Faculty discussed this fragmentation across multiple institutional levels:

- I think it's really a mixed bag ... particularly as it trickles down. So I would argue that probably within the departments, I'm not even sure they really recognize that it might be a responsibility of theirs to worry about these issues. I mean, when a faculty member raises it, I think it's kind of like the first time it might occur [with] chairs and their faculty colleagues.
- I think in terms of university programs, too, I think it's hit and miss. I think what universities tend to do is create a lot of programs without necessarily thinking about, okay, what are the outcomes that are being sought in this program. And so a lot of them tend to fizzle out after a while.

Such experiences illustrate that integrating diversity and cultural competency into educational spaces requires a supportive academic climate in which departments support diversity. The more supportive the institution, the more likely faculty are to incorporate diversity or CC into their curriculum. Furthermore, an unsupportive environment hinders the adjustment of students with different cultural backgrounds, acting as another significant barrier. Given this dynamic, it is particularly important to work toward fostering a climate of inclusion that offers a positive university environment for both faculty and students as well. A faculty member further explained how this can be achieved:

Every single employee has to go through—and this includes everyone from the president to the freshman student worker—every employee of the university has to go through annual training modules, and every year some of those training modules deal with tolerance, diversity, promoting inclusiveness, promoting tolerance and acceptance. And I think that's kind of on the idea of cultural competency, so it's something that we try to say this is something we value, and we're all going to remind ourselves of it on a regular basis.

While this is one example of how institutions can normalize issues of diversity through training that may build CC, faculty also acknowledged the challenges in doing so:

- I think the breakdown is that people have different views about what that is, and they're pushing different agendas, and they're seeking resources to push this agenda over that agenda. And that's where I see there not being any cohesion.
- I don't think there's a shared mission or a shared vision for diversity on this campus. I think it very much depends on the committee that you're speaking with. When I talk to department chairs, for example, they often

express having achieved a sense of accomplishment around diversity because they see so many Latinos and Asian Americans on campus.

In these instances, though universities are working toward programming to support diversity and CC, at times institutional responses are reactionary and attempt to address an issue rather than institute formal arrangements as baselines for supporting much-needed programming. Because this programming is often decentralized, academic programs, student centers, and academic centers provide spaces of inclusion and educational opportunities that fill the gaps in university programs. Furthermore, having clear and shared visions at every institutional level can alleviate a lack of cohesion among various groups of faculty and students with different aims. Working collectively and collaborating to develop a shared mission that facilitates systemic institutional change is essential, particularly in determining what diversity means and how it is achieved in ways that are inclusive.

### **Conclusion**

True to findings in similar fields, our respondents underscored the relevance of cultural competence skillsets in public-oriented professional disciplines and highlighted the commitment and intentionality required to teach it. Generally, the respondents presented their pedagogy as being driven by personal awareness and experience that consistently undergoes self-examination, particularly vis-à-vis the students in front of them. Faculty approached pedagogy with an emphasis on process and content, including establishing a classroom environment that encourages personal reflection about identity and bias, not just within students, but also among peers and faculty. In such a conducive environment, pedagogical content might include (1) analysis of case studies, (2) guided classroom conversations, (3) critical examinations of environments and processes to identify power differentials, (4) interviews with diverse stakeholders who are recipients of public policy, (5) designing solutions with policy stakeholders, and (6) purposeful dialogue with demographically different people. Overall, the pedagogical approaches of the interviewees reflect an emphasis on application and problem solving informed by theoretical, experiential knowledge (both professional and personal) as well as core beliefs and identity.

In this study, however, some interesting complications became clear. Teaching and learning cultural competence involves a range of orientations and implementation strategies, including the development of curriculum, direction of faculty and administrators, and shared values regarding the importance of CC in pedagogical approaches. Our study also suggests that fractures in the implementation of a CC-based curriculum are related to faculty and administration values and that these values cannot necessarily be taught. An official dedication to increasing the CC of students and, by extension, public affairs professionals, cannot be mandated. Institutional approaches that lead to cohesive and sustained

improvements rely on critical awareness of competency and attention to the barriers impeding the integration of programs. Success is dependent on institutional support for those programs and a shared vision that is inclusive and relevant to the diversity of students and faculty.

On a practical level, faculty trying to build CC into coursework face institutional and philosophical barriers. Scholarship and materials for teaching cultural competence are not aligned with traditional strategies such as reading and lectures. In this study, faculty described a need for more creative, active, and immersive forms of teaching and learning. Part of a cohesive structure for sustained improvements to CC curricula requires resources such as funding and time needed to implement curriculum changes and teaching strategies.

We are aware of the limitations of this initial work, namely that it does not adequately consider the critical institutional and administrative dimensions of creating and implementing pedagogy. This study is an initial step in our process of systematically developing a landscape depicting culturally relevant pedagogical approaches, opportunities, challenges, and barriers at the macro and micro level. Moreover, our next steps will further examine the varying institutional contexts of these four universities to understand the institutional environments that best support the incorporation of CC curriculum and the development of faculty capacities to teach CC. Furthermore, we encourage our colleagues to consider further research that develops essential scholarship and research related to the experiences of public affairs professionals and the stories that support the development of this field.

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