

Equity and Justice Study:
Department of Political Science, Northeastern University

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EDU 6051: Culture, Equity, Power & Influence
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The Department of Political Science at Northeastern University prides itself on a rigorous and robust curriculum. In my role as Administrative Assistant, I schedule courses, approve direct studies and individual instructions, set prerequisites, curate our database of course syllabi, and schedule finals. As a result, I have a fairly good read on our cultural climate. As one might expect, our curriculum is inherently tied to culture. As Sonia Nieto points out: “[culture] is greatly influenced by the political, historical, and economic conditions in which it is found” (134). Thus, our work in political science is directly tied to culture, and as a result tied to diversity, equity, and inclusion. When thinking about how to present my evaluation and suggest solutions, I thought I would structure my paper using Gorski and Swalwell’s equity literacy model: recognize, respond, redress, and cultivate and sustain.

To begin, I want to “recognize even subtle forms of bias, discrimination, and inequity” (p. 37) in the Department of Political Science. The department seems to have stayed static through my time at Northeastern, despite the ever changing climate around us. We have no concrete data from students on how they feel about the culture of our department; this seems to me to be willful ignorance, or at least along the lines of “ignorance is bliss.” Despite a lack of hard data, I can point to some anecdotal feedback: the only person of color on staff regularly hears from students of color wondering when the department will look like them, and that they feel their peers are apathetic to their real struggles with equity on campus.

Additionally, taking a glance through various syllabi (and acknowledging there are some outliers), students often face rigorous and tedious tasks to be considered as “participating” in class to earn a passing grade, and some faculty also use expensive textbooks that alienate students from learning. This classroom structure has a significant impact not only students of

color, but also impacts students experiencing poverty, neurodivergence, physical differences, and some combination therein.

Gorski and Swalwell then suggest that the response to “bias, discrimination, and inequity” should be conducted “in a thoughtful and equitable manner” (p. 37). I am not personally aware of any individual instances of bias and their immediate response. I suppose on one hand, this could be a good thing. On the other hand, it could also mean that those instances are swept under the rug. While individual instances of bias, discrimination, and inequity are *probably* handled in the way Gorski and Swalwell describe, the department does not engage in preventing these situations from happening at a systemic level, as referenced in the next section.

The next step of equity literacy is of particular interest to me, because the key to redressing bias includes not only responding to bias but also “studying the ways in which bigger social change happens” (p. 37). The department seems to be working on this, at least to some degree. Per the request of the College of Social Science and Humanities, each department has been asked to create a faculty task force on diversity, equity, and inclusion (of which, the political science committee chair has added the word “justice” and rearranged it so the acronym is JEDI).

And while we did recently have a diversity training for faculty put on by Rev. Dr. Jamie Washington, it was like taking our first step well after the marathon started. The content and conversations were good, but not everyone was there and it was clear that most people appeared to want answers rather than do work themselves. Outside of this, the department rarely engages in conversations about the equity of our faculty and staff, let alone the equity of students—and when we do, it feels rushed, unimportant, and not given enough space.

The last piece of equity literacy is to “cultivate and sustain bias-free and discrimination-free communities, which requires an understanding that doing so is a basic responsibility for everyone in a civil society” (p. 37). Unfortunately, I don’t feel the department could be cultivating or sustaining a community like this without first developing the previously mentioned abilities. While Gorski and Swalwell don’t allude to an order in which to develop these abilities, this is most certainly an ability that is an outcome of developing a competency first with recognizing, responding, and redressing.

Using Sonia Nieto’s framework for evaluating the level of multicultural education, I would place our department somewhere in the middle. There is no tolerance for overt signs of discrimination, a multicultural perspective is evident in on campus activities activities, and students and faculty constantly challenge the institution on its ideals (level 1: tolerance). While students and teachers have a dialogue and diversity is acknowledged, policies, curriculum, and textbooks are certainly lacking diversity (level 2: acceptance)—though this is a work in progress, as the JEDI committee is currently evaluating syllabi and course materials. Unfortunately, I don’t think our curriculum is more explicitly antiracist and honest (level 3: respect) and multicultural education does not pervade the curriculum and certainly isn’t visible everywhere (level 4: affirmation, solidarity, and critique) (MacDonald-Dennis 2022).

Based on information gathered above and in reference to sources used in the first module of this class, I propose three potential areas of growth for the department: (1) make active learning an expectation of faculty and staff, (2) develop a unified model of equitable education and implement it across the department, and (3) host a speaker series for faculty, staff, and students and invite speakers with outside perspectives on equitable education.

Despite a constant reminder from the JEDI committee at our monthly department meeting, there is no active learning for the department as a whole. It seems very much like the department is relying on only the committee to do the work rather than do their own personal work on these matters. As a result, I propose that faculty and staff come to each meeting having read and taken notes on an article discussing equity and diversity in higher education. A discussion on these materials and principles as a large group is a good start to develop a stronger competency in redressing bias by self education.

The department should then use this time to develop a unified syllabus template. This should include information about equitable practices (ranging from anti-racist to anti-ableist and everything in between) in their classrooms, in their teachings, and in their materials. If we are to move forward as a team, we need to plan as a team. Further, after JEDI completes an initial evaluation of course curriculum, syllabi, and materials, each faculty member needs to commit to making changes and adhering to equitable educational practices—then be held accountable. Since the department exists within the college, and the college within the university, we need to take advantage of what our faculty can influence in the immediate term—their classrooms, their offices, etc.—so that they can find ways to influence the college, the institution, and the broader society in the long term (MacDonald-Dennis 2022).

Lastly, I suggest working on developing a speaker series for political science on topics of culture, equity, power, and influence. Many leading researchers in our field do work specifically on these issues. It would serve as both a tool for students and faculty and staff, and reaffirm our commitment to equitable education. If we are ever to make further steps into level 3 and level 4 of Nieto's framework, we have to begin to incorporate these discussions and pieces of research into every facet of our program: from classroom to event space.

References

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- Nieto, S. (2008). *Chapter 9: Culture and education*. Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, 107(1), 127–142. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-7984.2008.00137.x>