Introduction

This report is the product of vigorous, on-going discussion from a wide range of faculty and staff across numerous disciplines and units at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Our charge from the Executive Vice-Chancellor has been to consider the broad issue of diversity and inclusion with regard to curricular issues at UNL.

From the start, we have been aware that our work takes place at a particular historical moment and within the specific contexts of our campus and state. Undoubtedly, we live in a dramatic transitional – and somewhat paradoxical – moment in terms of diversity. A host of large-scale structural changes has brought the world closer together and spurred major demographic shifts in our state, nation and across the globe, which, in turn, have raised age-old questions about community, nation, belonging, democracy, rights and justice. For some, this new era of globalization and multiculturalism is exhilarating, providing positive new experiences, as well as opportunities for understanding and cooperation across traditional lines of difference. For others, these transformations elicit concern, fear and opposition as they challenge a host of traditional ways of being. At the same time that historically marginalized communities have felt emboldened in new ways to raise their voices, assert their rights and demand meaningful inclusion into institutions and processes that have heretofore been closed off, or provided severely limited access, countervailing forces have gathered to push back those efforts and defend the status quo. The overall result has been an intense period of reaction, strife and sometimes conflict over issues of race, ethnicity, national status, class, gender, sexuality and other demarcations of social transformation.

Not surprisingly, college campuses have been one important sphere of struggle over these complex issues and UNL has not been immune. Over the past several years, a series of charged incidents has taken place on our campus that have underscored broader tensions over race and gender relations, immigrant rights, LGBTQ inclusion and issues of free speech. These events have spurred sometimes heated discussion about the role of the university in fostering diversity and inclusion within its realm. This committee’s charge emerged out of this larger context and, specifically, the most recent round of campus debate.

It should also be noted at the outset that there is a certain amount of cynicism and skepticism in our community among many students, faculty, staff about our work. There is a perception – rightly or wrongly – that we have been here before and that little concrete progress has occurred. As a result, there is a shallow reservoir of faith, trust and patience. The burden is on the institution’s leaders to acknowledge this context and take extraordinary steps to demonstrate their good faith through consequential action.

Certainly, we all believe that the university has a special responsibility to help students and the wider community interrogate these complex issues and navigate differences in constructive ways. That is fundamental to our educational purpose, as well as to the role of a land-grant institution. Our work in this committee is fueled by that belief and a desire to be a part of a positive, on-going process of institutional improvement at UNL.
Recommendations

1) Creating a Culture of Diversity and Inclusion at UNL:

While this committee’s mission bears most directly on the classroom setting, we also believe the process of integrating diversity and inclusivity into the curriculum starts with creating a culture of diversity and inclusion that permeates all levels of the university. Before faculty and staff will make the effort to integrate diversity and inclusion, they need to understand what a strongly held value this is at all levels of the university. Each level needs the support of the others, starting with a strong, consistent and unequivocal message from senior university administration through college leadership, unit heads, faculty and staff implementation. The overall goal must be to make diversity and inclusion an ingrained part of the culture, rather than a periodic reaction to crisis.

Part of this process is to clearly define what we mean when we say we value “diversity” and “inclusion” in the classroom. For our committee, we have taken an expansive view of these terms. In part, they mean attracting and retaining a diverse student body, faculty and staff. In addition, they mean equipping our students to understand the “varieties of human experience and human difference,” that they are part of a bigger historical reality where resources and power have not been distributed equally across various lines of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, etc. and that those inequalities continue to be significant in our local, national and global experience. Finally, they mean fostering an educational environment that values freedom of expression, is welcoming to the widest possible range of viewpoints, teaches our students how to engage difference in open-minded and constructive ways and works to equalize the educational opportunities available to all its students in pursuit of the goals of knowledge and justice.

As a related note, there was discussion about whether the terms “diversity” and inclusion” are adequate labels for what we are trying to accomplish. Some felt that we might also draw on the language of “social justice” and “equity” to expand the parameters of our work and further clarify our goals.

Yet, even as strong, consistent messaging is a critical part of this process, the effort to build diversity and inclusion at UNL must extend beyond words and promises and into clear, identifiable action. Part of the malaise that has set in on our campus in recent years has been rooted in a sense that administrative leadership has too often been reactive, rather than proactive, when it comes to diversity and inclusion. The goal must be to become a national leader in this area and that requires bold, innovative, even visionary, leadership as well as widespread participation at every level. One hopeful sign is the decision to hire a diversity vice-chancellor who will work to achieve these ends. We see this as a great opportunity for UNL.

We also recognize that the classroom is a part of a bigger community. What is happening on campus, in our city, state, nation and world inevitably flows into our classes, and vice versa, as we prepare young men and women to head out into the world as productive citizens and members of diverse local, national and global communities. The experience they have at UNL must prepare them for those realities. Understanding, respecting and managing difference is a core skill in the 21st century.

In order to foster the type of broader culture of diversity and inclusion we envision, we encourage the creation of a large endowment for an on-going, world-class lecture series – similar to the E.N. Thomson Forum – that would bring to campus leading scholars, artists, thinkers and practitioners related to diversity and inclusion to share their insights, encourage dialog and spur further action. We might call it something like the Aaron Douglas Diversity Forum, to acknowledge one of our pioneering African American graduates who was the leading visual artist of the Harlem Renaissance.

We also want to urge the university to think about the physical landscape of the campus and consider new ways it might celebrate and embody the university’s commitment to diversity and inclusion. As Rachel Anderson of the Nebraska Forest Service has pointed out, “students of color at predominantly white institutions encounter significant challenges in the physical campus culture, including the architecture of university buildings and landscapes as well as other symbols like signage and artwork.” There are a number of ways the university might address this issue. For example, the university might initiate a high-profile public art campaign on campus to
highlight pioneering and distinguished UNL graduates - or Nebraskans, more generally - who represent various historically marginalized groups. These figures might be featured on flags, or banners, that hang from light poles around campus, or in other highly visible ways. When you walk near the College of Business, these banners might feature business-related figures. This would underscore the commitment the institution has to these communities, and the pride it has in these significant graduates. It would also allow members of those communities, as they walked around campus, to feel a greater sense of belonging and inclusion, which is severely lacking right now. And, of course, such banners would be educative for all members of our campus community, as well as visitors. We might even invite student artists, or local artists in Lincoln, to create the banners. Again, the idea here is to think about how the physical environment on our campus might better convey the institution’s values, in this case to diversity and inclusion.

2) Provide Faculty with Tools and Resources to Succeed

As important as leadership and vision from university administrators are to this process, we also understand that institutions are often slow and lumbering when it comes to change and that the most innovative ideas usually percolate up from the lived experience of students, as well as faculty and staff grappling with these issues on campus and inside classrooms. In the recent past, as the administrative structure of the university has grown substantially, the voice and power of students and faculty has diminished. Going forward, it is essential to cultivate and incentivize the participation of these groups in all diversity and inclusion efforts.

A logical place to start is with the orientation of new faculty and staff. It is essential that this process include clear and compelling statements of commitment to diversity and inclusion as a fundamental value of the university, as well as concrete examples and resources that articulate what is meant by “diversity” and “inclusion” and spell out what is expected of individuals and units as a part of this overall mission. For instance, the Canvas modules from Academic Affairs for new faculty should include an updated and improved diversity module that includes this material and lists resources to help faculty comfortably include diversity and inclusion in their lesson plans. There was widespread agreement on this committee that the current suggested syllabi language on diversity and inclusion, as well as “Academic Freedom and Civility,” is inadequate and even problematic. In addition, there was shared sentiment on this committee that diversity and inclusion efforts could be fostered by including them as a valued part of the total evaluation process for faculty promotion and tenure. Defining what that might look like would necessarily be left to individual colleges and units, but we feel strongly that in order for diversity and inclusion to take firmer root at UNL, more formal processes need to be implemented that recognize, value and reward faculty and staff for their work in this area.

There is also enthusiasm for the creation of a university-wide faculty award and other forms of special recognition that acknowledge classroom innovation and excellence in the field of diversity and inclusion. By highlighting and sharing the work of classroom leaders in this area, the university might inspire others to follow suit.

We recognize that individual faculty and staff are at different places when it comes to their experience with diversity and inclusion and that there are a certain number of people who are interested in these efforts and who would like to better include them in their classes, but who are not sure how to begin. As a result, we suggest the implementation of some measures to encourage and support faculty and staff development in this area. At a basic level, these efforts might include periodic seminars, lectures and teaching and diversity-oriented brown bag events to promote the exchange of ideas and approaches related to diversity and inclusion within the classroom. Also, the university might support faculty and staff who would like to take a personal inventory, or self-assessment, measure on diversity and inclusion, like the Intercultural Development Inventory (https://idiinventory.com), to establish a base-line to work from. On a deeper level, the university might institute a competitive fellowship or mini-grant program similar to the Instructional Improvement Fund in the College of Arts & Sciences (https://cas.unl.edu/instructional-improvement-fund) to encourage individual faculty and staff, small clusters of faculty and staff, or even entire units, toward innovative diversity and inclusion-related curricular development. These types of “incubator” programs often have a mushrooming effect and spur broader innovation. Similarly, the university could develop a program modeled after the Peer Review of Teaching Project (https://peerreview.unl.edu) to offer interested faculty, particularly junior faculty or less experienced faculty, a more structured opportunity to think deeply and in pragmatic ways about how they might improve diversity and
inclusion within their courses. Another possibility is the creation of a “Diversity and Inclusivity Task-Force,” made up of experts drawn from our existing pool of talent on campus, that would work with individual faculty and staff, specific units, or colleges, that would like to think about how to implement diversity and inclusion-related measures in their curricula.

And because diversity and inclusion would mean many different things in particular colleges, disciplines and classrooms, it is important to showcase examples of successful diversity integration in the curriculum. It would benefit faculty to create an annual celebration that features brief case studies, or examples, from various colleges where faculty discuss their diversity and inclusion efforts. An event like this would simultaneously celebrate faculty work and create a diversity networking event. One effective model for short-form presentations and networking events that has become popular in the design and creative arts world is Pecha Kucha (https://www.pechakucha.org).

Finally, we encourage the university to create a central clearinghouse where core resources and best practices can be shared, so that each college is not reinventing the wheel, so to speak.

There are a number of external models that the university might examine and draw on for inspiration and examples of work in this area, particularly the Centers for Teaching and Learning that have been established on a variety of campuses. Similarly, the Association of American Colleges & Universities published a useful article in 2017, titled, “Advancing Diversity and Inclusion through Strategic Multilevel Leadership,” which includes four specific cases. (https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/2017/summer-fall/takayama_kaplan_cook-sather)

3) A Common Learning Experience

In the wake of recent incidents on campus, it has become clear that many UNL students move through their educational process at the university without gaining a basic understanding of and skills related to diversity and inclusion. Time and again, students of color, as well as allied students, faculty and staff, have suggested a common learning experience for all UNL students to address this short-coming. In 2016, student organizers of the #BlackLivesMatter demonstration on campus emphasized this idea among their lists of demands presented to the university administration. Again last year, in the wake of the controversy over the presence of a neo-nazi student on campus, students of color and their allies reiterated this call. Yet, to date, there has been no movement in this direction. It is widely acknowledged that ACE 9, which has carried the educational burden for diversity in the general education requirements at UNL, has not been up to the task, nor have listening sessions or voluntary programming through the Gaughan Center, which tend to reach the “choir,” but not the wider university community. Some sort of more structured educational intervention seems necessary.

There was broad support on our committee for some sort of common learning experience for all UNL students to help them better understand the basic contours of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc. in American society, though no consensus on how to achieve that end. One question that emerged in our discussions was whether one course – for example, ETHN 100 – is the best way to go, or if a constellation of courses that achieve the same end, might make more sense. No doubt, a common course requirement would require significant resources from the university to staff the number of sections required to provide the course to all university students, though other institutions have and do make that investment. Further, some raised the challenge of earning approval for such a course from a majority of faculty. In addition to a required, common, semester-long course, another possibility is a “one-UNL, one text” approach, that would require in-coming students to read a shared text related to diversity and inclusion and then participate in discussion, or other programming, on that text and its core themes. And lastly, there was discussion of the power that community-based learning can have on students to think beyond their own identity and catalyze personal transformation with respect to understanding and appreciating diversity.