

Department of Geography and Sustainable Planning DEI-AB Plan

A living document

Submitted by Unit Head Jim Penn

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The disciplines of geography, planning and urban studies are uniquely suited to examine, study and teach a broad and exciting spectrum of topics addressing diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility and belonging (DEI-AB). The bridging of both the natural/physical and social sciences and the interdisciplinary nature of geography make it an ideal discipline to explore and discover aspects of DEI-AB across all cultures on our planet. The use of geographic information systems (GIS) and remote sensing allows geographers and students map DEI-AB phenomena over time and space, providing new insights while playing a crucial role in problem-solving activities and policies. Planning studies and practice, whether community, regional, national or international, enhances this perspective and its application to society. Urban studies have been one of the leading fields of study in DEI-AB and continue to gain importance as the world population becomes increasingly urban or linked to urban areas. Therefore, our students and faculty are in a unique and advantageous position to learn about DEI-AB and offer solutions to this pressing challenge of the century. This includes their actual engagement with local communities as well as national and international community partners, through coursework and activities, internships, and community engagement projects.

Geographers and planners recognize that racism and exclusion have existed in the fields of geography and planning (e.g., Ellen Semple and environmental determinism) as we examine the academic and intellectual opposition to this past (e.g., Carl Sauer and the emergence and dominance of the “Sauer School” of cultural geography, Jane Jacobs and her fight against the destruction of traditional urban neighborhoods) while we explore today’s world. Observation in fieldwork and the synthesis of repeated observations are a key element of geographic study that helps us to identify and understand elements of DEI-AB in so many different ways. Geographic identification, analysis and mapping of DEI-AB phenomena are important parts of our discipline and are now aided by state-of-the art technology and information systems. Diversity, equity, and inclusion have been at the core of urban and regional planning efforts in geography from a core public health perspective. Sadly, the United States is home to a plethora of notable, widely recognized planning failures such as the ultra-white post-WWII suburban “Levittowns” in Pennsylvania and elsewhere, housing developments and concurrent neighborhood redlining. Several of our courses have students map these phenomena, including the effects of redlining and other segregation policies and practices. Today, environmental planning, fair housing, food deserts, economic development, hazard mitigation and mixed land use, and related environmental justice issues are at the core of our curriculum, and provide students and faculty with problem-solving and learning opportunities. We also recognize that there is much work to be done, much more work.

The following is an incomplete summary of some key issues that concern our faculty and staff with respect to DEI-AB, and our objectives and strategies to address, better learn about, and remedy these problems. Some are rather open questions, objectives, or thoughts, while others suggest remedies or courses of action and faculty development strategies.

Preliminary Issues, Goals and Objectives:

1. With the hiring interview process, improving our current requirements for DEI-AB statement and how DEI-AB applies in their teaching, research and service activities: A committee will review and revise current requirements.

2. How to reach and help students who aren't prepared for a university-level education?

We recognize that this problem is serious at GVSU and can mean many things, such as:

Their high school experience left them unprepared for classes at GVSU.

They don't want to be here in the first place.

They don't have an interest in their current classes or major.

Are unsure about what they want to do with their lives now, but university studies has little appeal.

Share and promote our strategies to adjust, build in changes and additions during the semester to better serve the students in their classes.

3. How to implement student recommendations to keep work groups in classes small, three to four student maximums, even when some classes are very large?

4. Conduct more and improved student surveys in our classes:

This will allow us to learn more about students and what topics interest students, their hobbies and personal interests, be more inclusive with our teaching and discover and identify opportunities to help us connect better to students and help them to realize their personal interests and experiences are important to us. This will also help better connect students with each other so they can find new friendships and will feel less alone at GVSU. This includes us as faculty sharing our personal experiences and backgrounds with students.

5. Identify examples of syllabi and course promotion we can share that:

Help students and make them feel more welcome, included, and interested in our courses and possibly our major.

Learn how to improve our syllabi so we can enhance communication and exchanges with students, and also enrich our course content and purpose.

Making sure that we notify students, provide links and contact information to support groups at GVSU such as OMA, DSR, other groups, while avoiding “targeting” students about affinity groups.

Help students be aware of mental health issues and support available.

Effectively encourage students to enroll in our GIS and remote sensing courses as a way to explore their personal interests, including DEI-AB topics.

6. Faculty will be required to attend DEI-AB events and workshops, both on and off campus (this is a broad category and some examples of this are included in this document).

7. Sharing, distributing, studying our research publications that address DEI-AB and how we use them in our teaching.

8. Faculty presentations, colloquia and panel participation on DEI-AB issues.

9. Bringing in speakers on teaching students today, and DEI-AB issues.

10. Field trips and exercises, assignments for faculty and students that provide experiential learning on DEI-AB, local and distant (eg., City of Grand Rapids tours with GPY 327 classes, visits to Grand Rapids African American Museum and Archives (GPY 220, 327, 495), GPY 220 cultural landscapes exercises, GPY 362 farm and farmer visits, ENS/PHI 302 Environmental Justice Detroit field trips, etc.

11. Direct community engagement and assistance by faculty and students that supports DEI-AB (e.g, GIS Day Activities with Shawmut Hills Grand Rapids Public Schools).

12. Obtain and/or purchase more videos, documentaries and other films related to DEI-AB. The GVSU library will also assist with this.

13. Examining racism and exclusion in the fields of geography and planning, current status and how far into the past? E.g., Semple, others and environmental determinism? AAG, APA resources and data? This is done in our Capstone class as well as planning, urban studies classes, and other courses (e.g., GPY 111, 220, 324, 327, 414, 495).

Current 2024-25 academic year support for DEI-AB initiatives using funds from the CLAS Dean's office (\$1000) and our department funds:

Honors Minority Student Mixer event August 30, 2024 - \$200

Fieldtrip to Winkel Chestnut Farms, September 18, 2024 (\$300)

Landscapes of Student Debt Symposium – October 17, 2024 - \$200

Funding additional student and faculty field trips during the academic year (e.g., GPY 220, 324, 327, 495) – TBD.

Association of American Geographers Annual Meeting in Detroit, Michigan, March 24-28. We aim to support students presenting work on DEI-AB issues as well as transportation and lodging for students. Matching funds will be requested.

Additional Examples of DEI-AB Strategic Planning and Goals as we progress:

Our department has been actively developing inclusive courses and striving to make our major more equitable and inclusive for all GVSU students. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are central to our new virtual study-abroad course (GPY 496). The course examines The Netherlands and aims to remove cost and time constraints and render it accessible to all GVSU students regardless of background, gender, affordability, or international and cultural entry restrictions.

In 2023 we actively sought faculty from a CLAS cluster hire initiative to enhance our DEI-AB curriculum and include an important subfield in geography in our curriculum: The study of race, ethnicity and place. From that cluster hire, Dr. Heather Moody is now housed in our department and has already developed and a new DEI-AB-focused course (GPY 327 – Place, race and ethnicity) and is currently developing an urban ecological design course that examines the urban ecologies of race and ethnicity). We are also making significant changes in our existing courses to better address DEI-AB issues, such as in GPY 111, GPY 220, GPY 361 and GPY 362, and all of our Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and remote sensing lab courses.

Our faculty is composed of a significant number of minorities and nearly all come from families that are mostly minorities and/or mixed. At the same time, we recognize that his by itself does not mean that we are all qualified to teach or research DEI-AB and we

strive to help our faculty learn how to identify, include and apply opportunities for DEI-AB learning in their courses and research, and in creative ways, including community engagement projects. We understand that DEI-AB means everyone, not just people who are considered “minorities” in the USA.