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Taubman College Architecture

Curricular Reform Evaluation Report

June 2022

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INTRODUCTION

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS + GRATITUDE

The Taubman College Diversity Equity & Inclusion (DEI) team extends the deepest gratitude to all the students, faculty, and staff who contributed their ideas, thoughts, and experiences to the development of the Curricular Reform Evaluation Report. This includes students who participated in focus groups, surveys, and other conversations with the DEI Team and instructors who shared their course materials as a part of this evaluation. We also give heartfelt gratitude to the faculty, who are deeply committed to making architectural education more equitable and inclusive. And lastly, to the students and supporters who lead the Design Justice Actions. Your activism created a new path for student/faculty partnerships to co-create a learning environment that centers social justice and embed our commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion within the institution.

BACKGROUND

Student organizing called for the first program-wide, collaborative review of course syllabi, [teaching methodology](#), and course expectations in the architecture program at Taubman College. In summer 2020, a group of students organized the Design Justice Actions. They wrote a list of actions calling on faculty and administrators to ***“Restructure and decolonize our design training to include Black, Indigenous, and People of color (BIPOC) voices, and integrate new thought, research, and scholarship on the history of spatial injustice into our core curriculum.”*** Working with the administration, student volunteers convened 15 working groups that held 30 sessions over three weeks to review core courses for the upcoming semester. These sessions were organized to enable conversations between students and faculty about racial equity and inclusion at Taubman College, providing a venue for students to shape their curriculum in partnership with faculty. Students facilitated a space that focused on better understanding what perspectives are elevated and what groups are still being [marginalized](#) in the architecture field more broadly.

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To build on the success of these conversations, Taubman College created a new graduate student staff assistant position within the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion team to evaluate the architecture's syllabi review. This action was taken with the intention of making sure a student was paid for completing this work rather than relying on volunteer effort. The goal is to understand the impact these initiatives have on courses and to provide recommendations for moving forward. The syllabi review is a part of our commitment to creating learning spaces that enable people of different races, ethnicities, national origin, gender, gender expression, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, religion, age, and disability status to equitably shape the built environment through buildings, design, and policies. Students choosing Taubman College continue to show interest in challenging the architecture field's legacy of exclusion and advancing anti-racist approaches, research, and perspectives.

The Taubman College DEI team reviewed efforts by instructors to add course material and structures that decenter whiteness, promote inclusive teaching principles, and create a safer learning environment where people feel represented and respected. We approached this process intending to understand what methods are working in the program and identify opportunities for growth as our DEI efforts continue to evolve. This report summarizes our efforts, initial findings, and recommendations for continuing this process.

INCLUSIVE TEACHING FRAMEWORK

Our approach to this work used [U-M's Center for Research on Teaching and Learning's \(CRLT\) definition of Inclusive Teaching](#) as an evaluative framework. This is a widely available resource for members of the U-M community and is already used by many instructors at Taubman College. This framework defines **inclusive teaching** as cultivating a learning environment where all students are treated equitably, have equal access to learning, and feel valued and supported in their learning. CRLT outlines four strategic categories as key aspects of inclusive teaching:

- 1. Transparency** - Clearly communicating about norms, expectations, and evaluation criteria

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- 2. Academic Belonging** - Cultivating students' sense of connection to the discipline, scholarly, and professional communities
- 3. Structured Interactions** - Providing or eliciting goals, protocols, and processes to ensure group interactions don't default to patterns of prioritizing privileged voices or otherwise replicating systemic inequities
- 4. Critical Engagement of Difference** - Recognizing that students bring diverse identities, strengths, and needs to the learning environment

These strategies guide us to consider who has been included and supported in the field of architecture and help us challenge the assumptions that have traditionally been made about effective teaching practices and the ways students can bring their identities into classroom discussions.

PARTICIPANTS + DATA

Student Outreach

The DEI team conducted a series of focus groups, distributed a survey to architecture students at Taubman College, and had a community conversation through a Transparency Meeting. This gave students space to think about how changes to their course syllabi have impacted their class experiences. Over **60 students** were involved in this process. Students' insights and findings will be found throughout the report and are further supported by DEI team reviews of course materials.

Comparative Syllabus Review

In addition to collecting feedback and insights from students, the Taubman DEI team conducted a comparative review of syllabi from the Fall 2016 and Fall 2021 semesters to highlight where progress has been made and where there are still opportunities for growth. This comparative review was divided into four categories and guiding questions (based on inclusive teaching principles):

- 1. Transparency** - Are course expectations, communication norms, and grading clearly communicated?

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2. **Flexibility** - Does the syllabus demonstrate mutual respect, understanding, and accommodation of shifting student needs and circumstances?
3. **Critical engagement of difference** - Does the syllabus show opportunity for students to explore and safely discuss different approaches, backgrounds, or critical thought?
4. **Course content** - Does the course incorporate experiences and viewpoints of BIPOC, marginalized, non-European, and [intersectional](#) identity groups/communities?

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This section has overviews of our four evaluation areas, transparency, flexibility, critical engagement of difference, and course content. Each evaluation has a review of key themes, findings from our evaluation, and a summary of recommendations for next steps.

TRANSPARENCY

The comparative syllabus review showed improved expression of [course expectations](#) and communication norms in 2021 course materials. The strongest examples of transparency include clear descriptions of course expectations and grading. There were more explanations on how students can best engage and succeed in courses. There were clear examples of [inclusive teaching](#) language that invites students to fully participate in the classroom experience. This includes an invitation for students to be a part of classroom discussions and guidelines around how to best communicate with instructors outside of class time. Some instructors included sections in their course syllabi that described the desired course climate and highlighted the importance of students bringing expression of their unique identities into the classroom. A number of instructors also maximized the use of design, visual aids, and hyperlinks to help students understand course content. While a review of course syllabi revealed initiative to better communicate and provide clarity, our conversations with students revealed that there is still progress to be made in translating these efforts to the class experience.

Students recognized more inclusive language in their course syllabi and noted improved guidelines about being conscious of identity in the classroom. Through this report's engagement with students, participants expressed frustrations with what they characterize as grading inconsistencies, vague rubrics, and instructor approach to evaluation. They shared that instructors are clear about what they define as an "A" but could put more effort into helping students understand how to best get there. Students also discussed what they perceived as the subjective nature of studio courses being a source of frustration. Overall, many felt that studio professors were better at providing clear evaluation criteria, but there was still room for improvement for transparency about grading.

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Themes

Some instructors have excelled in creating syllabi that clearly explain student expectations, evaluation norms, and communication styles.

Students still perceive inconsistencies in grading and evaluation

Students have difficulty navigating class expectations and express experiencing a lack of clarity on how to succeed in different courses.

Students have difficulty understanding objective grading evaluation criteria in studio.

Recommendations

Use course syllabus as an opportunity to explicitly communicate the objectives, tasks, and assessment criteria for the course. Explain what you value as an instructor (especially what teaching for equity means to you), clarify how assignments are weighted, and provide a clear outline of the grading scale. Remind students of these throughout the semester.

Offer guidance on how students should prioritize various course tasks or requirements and allocate their time.

For studio courses: there should be an increased emphasis on helping students share their ideas and better understand how to excel in spaces that value new approaches and ideas over research and deference to expertise.

Explain the rationale of the course design and any changes that take place during the semester.

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CRITICAL ENGAGEMENT OF DIFFERENCE

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The principle of Critical Engagement of Difference includes introducing and facilitating discussions about multiple perspectives and making space for students to have the choice to bring their full identities into the classroom. Several instructors explored and safely discussed different approaches, backgrounds, and critical thoughts embedded in their courses. The strongest examples were classes that focused on social justice implications and perspectives within architecture. Students in our survey also reported feeling that architecture history and professional practice courses at Taubman College do this well. These courses prioritized allowing space for students to bring their understandings and identities in the co-creation of course content. There was more natural facilitation of conversations about different beliefs, experiences, and approaches that allowed students to consider how their unique identity shapes their interaction with certain concepts and the architectural field.

Some architecture courses are more technical in nature. In these courses, equity can align with critical engagement of difference by acknowledging how differences in experience, learning styles, and background might impact the student experience of the course. This can be accomplished by allowing students the opportunity to consider and share how their identities shape their relationship with the course material. This encourages students to join class discussions more fully based on how they learn and interact best. Other ways include linking the impact of the technology or materials study to marginalized communities or those who gain privilege from them. Overall, instructors should continue to search for ways to acknowledge and affirm students' different identities, strengths, and needs when designing their courses.

Themes

Positive experiences of critical engagement of difference occurred more naturally in courses where instructors communicate being open to students bringing new examples, perspectives, and approaches to classroom discussions.

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Emphasis on assignment completion doesn't always allow for enough critical thought and discussions facilitation.

Institutional centering of whiteness (behaviors, customs, ideology) continues to be the norm. If there is teaching that includes non-white values, approaches, and ideals, they are usually mentioned as "additional" and not embedded in the teaching pedagogy.

Architecture courses have made progress in acknowledging new thought and examples (i.e., flipped classrooms). Students want more clarity on how this is implemented.

Recommendations

Reflect on the historic centering of whiteness in teaching and learning. Design courses to help facilitate unlearning of what constitutes normal and understand how normal is often associated with whiteness. This includes understanding oneself as a racialized person and holding space for students to understand their social identities and how they interact with the built environment.

When course time doesn't allow for deeper exploration, present students with opportunities outside the classroom to discuss or learn more deeply about subject matter that resonates with them.

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Deliberately choose course language clearly outlining how students can prepare to successfully be part of discussions and activities.

Invite students to consider and share how their identities and experiences shape their relationship with various concepts and ways of thinking; embed this sort of reflection in the class materials.

Acknowledge campus events or world events that may be creating barriers to students' sense of being welcomed and valued.

Co-create course content with students including class discussion options, prioritization of concepts, and modes of submitting assignments.

FLEXIBILITY

The strongest displays of flexibility in course syllabi included sections that have empathetic language and provide campus resources for students. Most course syllabi include the standard language about student [accommodations](#). A few professors offer more thorough descriptions of their own approach to student accommodations. While this language is required, it is important for instructors to clearly define how those standards relate to their class and approach to communication specifically. This matters because supportive, clear, and inviting approaches to student accommodations reduce the barriers some students may face in communicating with professors and in being successful in the classroom. Implemented universally, the accommodations cease to be othered and support the learning and growth of all students. It is also helpful for professors to be transparent about timelines for grading. Students, lacking context, may not understand the priorities that professors also have in addition to their teaching.

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Students value opportunities to negotiate deadlines around their circumstances and appreciate guidance on best planning their time to succeed in courses. Students expressed that the increased flexibility with assignment dates, hybrid meeting options, and course load was helpful during the COVID-19 Pandemic, specifically in the 2020-2021 academic year. As classroom expectations have turned toward pre-pandemic norms, students are interested in institutionalizing flexible course schedules and course work. With the rise of hybrid models, many students feel frustrated with the inconsistent use of platforms for class resources - Canvas, Slack, Google Classroom, etc. - and wish to see more of their courses adopt a standard platform.

Themes

Standard student resource language can be found consistently in Taubman College course materials. Some instructors offer additional instructions or course-specific resources.

Students who know how to navigate the institution and have interpersonal relationships with professors tend to self-advocate more and receive greater flexibility and understanding from professors. Students who may be struggling, are not as connected to the institution, or do not have interpersonal connections are not always given adequate opportunities to comfortably express their needs to instructors or receive accommodations.

Students expressed that they do not receive enough upfront guidance with courseload, planning time, and completing courses successfully

Students appreciate the use of hybrid learning as an option.

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Students would like more consistent and streamlined classroom communication and assignment platforms.

Students want to know more about student success and support resources. Many find information about student resources, navigating accommodations, and how to best communicate with instructors to be limited.

Recommendations

Include intentional language about student accommodations that helps students understand how university policies and standards apply to their courses.

Encourage students to submit work in progress even if it may be incomplete at the time of deadline (during the semester). Use incomplete work as an opportunity to help students prioritize next steps to best complete the assignment.

Increase awareness of student affairs wellness checks; include in syllabus.

Evaluate course assignments and readings on a semester basis. Review course materials yearly for equity standards. The Chair’s office can organize syllabi reviews/feedback sessions that include students and faculty.

When possible, give students multiple options to complete assignments (i.e., essay, report, drawing, etc.)

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Use remote options for courses and meetings as a backup for students to stay engaged despite shifting circumstances.

Standardize using the same classroom platform and more integration between them if more than one is used.

Be explicit about the ways you want to communicate with students (including how to use office hours, what questions to ask in class vs email, etc.)

COURSE CONTENT

The DEI team used criteria of incorporation of experiences and viewpoints of BIPOC, marginalized, non-European, and [intersectional](#) groups, in conjunction with CRLT's understanding of Academic Belonging, to evaluate courses on fostering a sense of belonging for all students. In general, the analysis of syllabi between the 2016 and 2021 school years showed improved diversity of authors for required readings and more course content directly engaging with/promoting marginalized voices, with an emphasis on the latter. There is also a clear effort to incorporate inclusive content in the syllabus and teaching methodology. Across the board, students have stated that they appreciate these opportunities to learn from authors, practitioners, and frameworks not often included in traditional architectural pedagogy. Students want to be engaged in the creation of these opportunities, and more importantly, see the dedication of more classroom time to synthesizing diverse content. This allows many different voices the space to work with - and change - the existing pedagogy and curriculum, rather than begin and end at inclusion.

Technical courses are by nature limited in scope, which affects inclusion of diverse course content. These courses, similarly discussed in Critical Engagement of Difference, tend to focus on contemporary applications of programs or methodologies, instead

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of incorporating a wider range of backgrounds. This could give students the impression that certain course topics operate outside of DEI discussions and implications.

Architecture studio classes remain a challenge to evaluate due to the engaged nature of teaching studio, as well as the number of studios in a given semester. A dedicated initiative would be needed to acquire concrete data on each studio. In general, students note that they would appreciate more content and perspectives that decenter whiteness.

Themes	Students have noticed improvements in incorporating DEI and anti-racism principles in specific courses, though not consistent across all offered classes.
	Students want to be engaged in efforts to have different perspectives and in-depth classroom discussions about DEI and anti-racism.
	Courses that exhibit high flexibility and strong critical engagement of difference tend to see deep engagement in diverse topics students find interesting.
Recommendations	Provide a way for students to submit people, places, and ideas for inclusion in course syllabi and compensate efforts. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> This could manifest through seminars designed to rewrite syllabi, such as Professor Andrew Herscher’s Futures Past
	Conduct a review of studio classes (Institutions and Propositions) to ensure that there is a framework that aligns faculty’s experience with the subject and the resources being shared.

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- This review should work in conjunction with teaching evaluations but should 1) compare what was projected to be taught with what students felt was actually taught, and 2) evaluate the precedents and case studies with the resulting architectural output of the studio.
- The review’s goal is not to conform all studio classes to the same methodology but rather evaluate each studio with the expertise of that professor and the relative engagement of diverse perspectives.

Conduct student and faculty syllabi reviews on a yearly basis.

Differentiate in the syllabus between content written by diverse authors instead of content written about diverse perspectives, and provide background on authors encountered frequently.

Supporting students who are exploring topics that are not considered mainstream by paying community members or other experienced practitioners to serve as advisors and reviewers

Make a link between their courses (regardless of what it is) to DEI and anti-racist principles

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This report should be used to help inform Taubman College’s continued efforts to create learning spaces that equitably shape the built environment through buildings, design, and policies. While there are instructors at the college taking up promising practices, students still express a desire for more elements of inclusive teaching and course content focused on equity and justice in the classroom. Thoughtfully considering the four evaluation areas we selected for this report, transparency, flexibility, critical engagement of difference, and course content, will be key a part of continuing the conversations needed to challenge traditional approaches to teaching and learning. Taubman College’s potential to be a leader in creating space for radical shifts in teaching and the architecture field at large will depend on our commitment to efforts that evaluate, build on our successes, and address shortcomings at the college. We can do this by continuing to facilitate opportunities for students to co-create and discuss class content and teaching approaches with instructors to continue making progress and address new challenges.

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<u>Accommodations</u>	Considerations of environment, curriculum format, or equipment that allow students to access course materials and complete tasks in a way that supports their well-being and success.
<u>Course expectations</u>	Expectations for student behavior within a class.
<u>Inclusive teaching</u>	Equity focused tool and practice that allows instructors to acknowledge and disrupt historical and contemporary patterns of educational disenfranchisement that often negatively impact marginalized and minoritized students.
<u>Intersectional</u>	Recognizing the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage.
<u>Marginalized</u>	A person, group, or concept treated as insignificant or peripheral.
<u>Teaching methodology</u>	Set of practices and principles used by instructors to make the process of teaching and learning effective for their students.

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[More Equity Focused Teaching Strategies](#)

[Setting Class Agreements](#)

[Phonetic Name Initiative \(+ pronouns\)](#)

[Inclusive Teaching Activities](#)

[DAP Anti-Racist Design Justice Index](#) (search for the Academic Institutions section)

[Setting the tone for inclusive classrooms](#)

[Discussion facilitation resources](#)

[How to apologize framework](#)

[Critical discussions guides](#)

[Self-reflection \(individually and collectively\) related to privilege and oppression](#)

[Racial Equity Framework](#)

Recommended Sample Syllabi:

[ARCH 603, Andrew Herscher](#)

[ARCH 583, Irene Hwang & Meredith Miller](#)

[ARCH 672, Ellie Arbons & Meredith Miller](#)