Teaching for Inclusivity

What College Leaders Need to Know

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At its heart, inclusive teaching strives to ensure that all voices are heard, and that all students have a chance to participate fully in the learning process. How do administrators, faculty leaders, and directors of campus teaching-and-learning centers do that? How do they expand instructors' instincts and course prep to include inclusivity ideas, especially in areas like intro-level math and the hard sciences, where rigor is usually the watchword?

To find out answers to these questions, *The Chronicle*, with support from Adobe, held a virtual forum, "Teaching for Inclusivity: What College Leaders Need to Know," on May 19. Moderated by Beckie Supiano, a senior writer for *The Chronicle*, the first panel featured two experts from the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Kelly Hogan, associate dean of instructional innovation, and Viji Sathy, associate dean of evaluation and assessment. During the second panel, Hogan and Sathy, co-authors of a new book on the topic, were joined by Jamiella Brooks, associate director of the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of Pennsylvania, and Sara Brownell, a professor in the School of Life Sciences at Arizona State University.

The following comments, which have been edited for clarity and length, represent key takeaways from the forum. To hear the full discussion, watch the recording here.

Beckie Supiano: Let's begin with a quick, working definition of what you mean by "inclusive teaching."

Viji Sathy: The idea is we move away from assumptions that students are lacking in any way. Diversity is an asset. The diverse experiences, identities, and skills that our students bring to the classroom are something that we want to use. We move toward the idea that we as instructors are creating learning environments and course designs that support those students, and if we don't have good structure, which is a key word we use in inclusive teaching, then we leave students behind.

Kelly Hogan: We don't want to leave it to chance that good things happen. It's not very inclusive to throw a question out to a large group of people. We know that the same three to four people are going to answer, because most people don't feel invited, or safe, to answer. Being more inclusive structures it more, so it could be small-group discussions, it could be anonymous ways to report, whether that's through technology or writing. That includes a lot more people in the

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Associate Dean for Evaluation and Assessment for the College of Arts & Sciences, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

practice, and that practice is the basis of learning.

Supiano: Let's imagine there's a college where all the instructors decide to teach this way. What would that college look like?

Hogan: Wow, that would be an awesome place to be. Students would feel respected as individuals. We wouldn't see disparities in who was learning more, or who was retained more, or who was earning more grades. Students might feel more balanced. Feeling connected and feeling a sense of belonging would go a long way with some of the mental-wellness issues we're dealing with.

Sathy: The outcomes: Better grades, more learning, disciplines might get diversified. Students see a place for themselves. They don't see these as weed-out courses; they see them as invitational.

Supiano: What are some common questions or misperceptions that you hear?

Sathy: One that comes up a lot is that inclusive approaches are what we might call hand-holding, or less vigorous approaches to preparing students for the quote "real" world. That's one where we want to emphasize again that structure is helpful for all students, even if some students might not need it.

For example, if you're talking in class, you might provide an outline of your notes. Some students might not use them, but students who might like to see how you organize the information might benefit from it. It's not just students who potentially don't know how to take good notes, it could be students for whom English is a second language. There's a variety of reasons why not everybody can take notes at the same pace, or organize information in a certain way. By providing this structure we're helping all of our students, and it doesn't harm the ones who don't need it.

Think about it not as a lack of rigor but as a set of supports around your students and what they need to succeed, which should be our goal.

Hogan: We like to think of inclusive thinking in these two buckets: Curriculum and course design, and how you interact with students. We don't want to just check the box because we've done one. Sometimes in the sciences we see people who are using really inclusive techniques, but their curriculum, and their syllabus, doesn't have as much of that content that can help students feel included. You could also have a class that is all about diversity but uses low structure in terms of inclusion.

Supiano: What are the biggest barriers that prevent instructors from

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adopting these techniques?

Hogan: For individual faculty members, it's time. Everyone's going to say, I want to do these things, but I don't have time. There's not enough supports, not enough training. Who do they go to to get that kind of training, and what kind of compensation is there?

Sathy: There might be the will to do it, but not as much resources to support it. There could also be some trepidation around how to approach this kind of work. Worry about doing it the wrong way, or saying something that would be offensive. It can be challenging. But it's worth the risk.

Instructors also need to see that there is value in doing this work — that the institution wants them to do it, that they're provided resources, that they're compensated in some way. Where is it in their promotion-retention guidelines, where improving the craft of teaching is valued?

Jamiella Brooks: I hear a lot of excitement from tenured faculty who are ready to take risks and a lot of trepidation from those who are on the tenure track but are not there and are wondering what the risks are going to be.

You don't have to change everything all at once. But even changing one or two things may have a big effect — positive or negative — on students, and so we have to acknowledge that as risks. And for administrators in particular, being honest and open about the measures of assessment, so that we reward instructors for taking these steps, even if it doesn't work. That failure gives us data that we can improve upon for the next time.

Supiano: Sara, you're a STEM professor. Could you talk about the needs and challenges of pursuing inclusive teaching in those disciplines?

Sara Brownell: We tend to think about STEM as being strictly objective. There's often assumptions about who should be a scientist. People are trying to change that narrative. But we have a lot of history of STEM instruction, where we assume that we don't bring identities into the classroom, that we present straight lectures of just content, that that content doesn't involve bias.

We all know that that's not true — that instructor is taking what they think is most interesting and crafting a lesson based on that. And the reality is that most instructors are still white, older men. We've got a real challenge changing this narrative — that science has to be objective — to the narrative that science is never objective, that by coming together and having more diverse viewpoints, we can try to

Sara Brownell

Professor, School of Life Sciences,
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counteract each other's biases.

Supiano: There are professors who are drawn to inclusive teaching but worry that they're going to take a career hit. That can be about the political climate at a state institution, or where they are in their careers — that this might be seen as less serious than focusing on something besides teaching.

Sathy: Yes, this is a reality. Our mission is to educate people about what we're doing, and this is about student success at its core. Look at the outcomes, make that argument for why you've made these changes. And people should get behind that, and it should be rewarded.

Brownell: I agree there are challenges. But to say we're afraid of teaching in an inclusive way — the flip side of that is, We're OK teaching exclusively. I don't think anyone is saying that. We can't teach in exclusive ways, so we have to teach in inclusive ways.

Brooks: We have to remember the stakes of what we are doing. The level of student disengagement we are seeing is at a crisis level — it was exacerbated by the pandemic, but it was a long time coming. Inclusive teaching isn't really that political; it's just good pedagogy.

Hogan: We don't have to label everything. As Jamiella said, it's just good pedagogy. There's a lot to be learned. Ways to be flexible, ways to celebrate growth with students. Those things don't have to be labeled, even though they make a student feel good. It's just treating people with respect.

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