

**The Leadership in Diversity Group, LLC**



**Inclusive Excellence Incubator:  
From Diversity Learning and Awareness to Action**

Laurie Lind, SFO and Senior Diversity Consultant  
The LinD Group

## **Inclusive Excellence Incubator: From Diversity Learning and Awareness to Action**

Laurie Lind, SFO and Senior Diversity Consultant  
The Leadership in Diversity Group, LLC

### **Overview**

One of the hallmarks of an exceptional university is its genuine commitment to excellence in research, teaching, and service to the community. An Inclusive Excellence (IE) university excels in these areas, but also values and practices inclusiveness, social justice, and equity as values that are embedded into the entirety of the institution.

The concept of IE, articulated and endorsed by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), moves a university away from a simplistic definition of diversity to a more inclusive, comprehensive, and omnipresent notion of inclusiveness; melds inclusiveness and academic excellence into one concept (to practice inclusiveness is excellence); shifts the responsibility for diversity and inclusiveness to everyone on campus as opposed to one unit or department shouldering the responsibility; and moves an institution away from conceptualizing diversity only in terms of a numerical goal of diverse constituents (Milem, Chang, & Lising, 2005; Bauman, Bustillos, Bensimon, Brown II, & Bartee, 2005; Williams, Berger, & McClendon, 2005). The focus becomes the transformation of a university into a vibrant community that embeds diversity and inclusiveness throughout the institution, including, but not limited to, demographics (numbers), curriculum, policies, enrollment, pedagogy, financial resources, diverse student learning outcomes, leadership, training, retention, student learning, marketing, technology, teaching, student advising, campus climate communications, administration, recruitment, hiring and promotion and tenure, assessment, institutional advancement, and evaluation. IE employs a broad and inclusive definition of diversity including gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, age, religion, disability, race/ethnicity, nationality, veteran status, and other important social dimensions that are part of the campus community.

An inclusive institution, in pursuit of a multiplicity of educational and social outcomes, also capitalizes on the varied rich backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, talents, gifts, and cultures that diverse individuals and groups bring to an institution of higher learning. Such colleges and universities advance social progress among the communities they serve and promote inclusive learning for all who enter their doors. Stated differently, IE institutions perceive diversity and inclusiveness as a *resource* that offers tremendous benefits and, subsequently, works towards cultivating, utilizing, and embedding the concept in all areas of the institution. By achieving and maintaining inclusive student, staff, and faculty bodies, along with creating an inclusive climate, an IE institution successfully connects with the reality of our evolving society and gains an edge in

preparing all students for living and working in a diverse democracy and an increasingly complex global society.

Given the above, one of many important tasks in practicing IE on college campuses is developing strategies and initiatives that utilize diversity as a resource. Capacity-building related to diversity in the form of training and educational efforts employs diversity to prepare campus constituencies to engage in diversity and inclusion efforts. Thus, awareness training and education, whether in the form of a diversity retreat, intergroup dialogue program, or an all-day diversity workshop, is a critical part of progress in practicing Inclusive Excellence on college campuses, pursuing equity, achieving social justice, and preparing students for leadership in an increasingly diverse world.

Social consciousness education allows for people to examine their world and begin the process of questioning equity, equality, social justice, and inclusive excellence. However, it is important to understand that all the training and education in the world will make little difference if students (or people in general) do not act to address issues affecting intergroup dynamics. Thus, one important exigency related to addressing issues of diversity and inclusiveness on a college campus is to create action-oriented initiatives designed to advance individuals and groups who have undergone diversity education into the problem-solving and action arena.

### **Purpose of the Paper**

The focus of this paper is on the Inclusive Excellence Incubator (IEI), a unique model developed by the author at the University of South Dakota designed to promote diversity awareness and foment action among college students in relation to diversity. The incubator was created in conjunction with a diversity awareness program titled Voices of Discovery (VOD) Intergroup Dialogue Program. Intergroup dialogues are sustained (five to six weeks or more) small group discussions between different groups (e.g., African American and White students, Asian and Latino students, Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual and Heterosexual students, etc.) within the context of safe space and led by trained facilitators. (The Voices of Discovery Intergroup Dialogue Program is explained in detail in a related publication which can be found at: <https://www.thelindgroup.com>.)

The mission of the Voices of Discovery program is to organize intergroup dialogues for the purpose of 1) fostering meaningful, structured interaction between students from diverse backgrounds; 2) increasing students' understanding and awareness of themselves, the groups they belong to, and of other students who belong to diverse groups; 3) increasing students' understanding about the complexity of intergroup issues; 4) contributing to positive intergroup relations on the campus; and 5) utilizing diversity as an resource for creating greater intergroup understanding. More and more college campuses are incorporating intergroup dialogues into their diversity training portfolios.

The Voices Program consists of several dimensions. First, professors are asked to consider giving course credit (course points) to their students for participating in the VOD program. Second, students accepted into the program participate in a dialogue group for five to six weeks (two hours per week). Third, the intergroup dialogues are facilitated by primarily graduate students who serve as volunteer intergroup dialogue facilitators. The facilitators undergo four hours of facilitation training, read six chapters in a book on facilitation, (Maxwell, Biren, & Thompson, 2011) and receive a VOD facilitation manual.

### **The Inclusive Excellence Incubator**

The idea for the Inclusive Excellence Incubator emerged out of a Health Sciences Major class taught by the author in The School of Health Sciences (SHS) at the University of South Dakota (USD). The School of Health Sciences, and specifically the Health Sciences Major, at USD has a very strong diversity awareness and service learning component that mandates students be involved in educational activities related to diversity and practical hands-on experiences that contribute to a community. Health Sciences Major students attend cultural events, diversity lectures, enroll in courses focused on diversity, and additionally complete service learning in areas serving vulnerable and/or marginalized people in which the campus and local community have identified a reciprocal need.

When the opportunity emerged for Health Sciences Major students to participate in the Voices of Discovery Program, the author readily enrolled the class in VOD and provided points as an incentive to participate in the program. Student feedback indicated that they loved the dialogues and were learning about issues of diversity. One drawback the author noticed to the Voices of Discovery program was the lack of an action component. Hence, the genesis of the Inclusive Excellence Incubator. After discussions with the director of VOD, it was decided that the author would create a program that engaged Health Sciences Major students in conceptualizing, designing, and implementing projects based on the learning and information gained from the Voices of Discovery Program. Stated differently, the incubator project would generate diversity action pieces designed to have a positive, informative impact on the campus community.

### **How the Incubator Works**

Students who participate in the Voices of Discovery Intergroup Dialogue are asked to design creative, campus community-based, action projects that demonstrate their learning in the dialogue program. The parameters (see Appendix) of the incubator include:

#### **Group/Team Project**

1) The project must be a group initiative that teaches students group and team-building skills and dynamics. Working in teams is a valuable skill that employers are requesting of graduating students. Thus, the group/team project is an indispensable part of the incubator.

### Voices Learning Outcomes

2) The project must include a synopsis of what was learned in the Voices of Discovery program and how it was incorporated into and conveyed in the action project. Identifying the learning outcomes achieved via the Voices program is important because it speaks to the value of the initiative and its contributions to the learning process.

### Professor Oversight

3) The professor must sign-off on the proposed project to insure sensitivity to the diversity topic and to communities that are the subject of the initiative, as well as to conform to university policies and procedures. This is important for a successful and impactful project.

### Action

4) The project must be disseminated to, performed in, or implemented on the campus before the end of semester. Students with projects requiring funds for implementation must go request funding from campus sources (e.g., student government, diversity office, cultural committee, university departments, etc.).

### Final Grade

5) The professor provides a final grade for the paper and for the total service learning Incubator project.

Below are some of the action projects produced by students in the Inclusive Excellence Incubator:

- 1) A sustainability two-person project was implemented in Coyote Village Dormitory involving recyclables collected once a week and permanent bin placement. Previously, there was no recycling in any of the students' dorms. The students who designed this project participated in a Voices sustainability group.
- 2) A four-person team created a University LGBT Campus Community Questionnaire and disseminated the instrument to students' in the Voices groups prior to and after completion of the Voices program. The goal was to ascertain attitudes and knowledge of diversity issues before and after participation in the dialogue program. These students also surveyed students in the student union to ascertain general knowledge of individuals not involved in VOD. This was done during lunchtime over a three-day period. These students participated in a LGBTIQ Voices group.
- 3) A video asking the question "Is this campus diverse?" was completed by two students after participating in the Students of Color/White Students group. From the students' discoveries, they created an iMovie entitled "USD Diversity Video" featuring Lady Gaga's song Born This Way and focusing on welcoming different groups on campus. The video went viral on campus and in the community and was lauded throughout the region.

Ultimately, one of the creators, as well as the author of this paper, received the President's Inclusive Excellence Award due to this and other works related to inclusiveness and diversity.

- 4) Four students, after completing the LGBTQI Voices group, did an examination of current gay/ lesbian marriage laws in the United States and South Dakota. These students shared this information in class, as well as their other courses per instructors' permission.
- 5) Six students created a Facebook page entitled Voices of Discovery: Supporting Unity to distribute positive and informative material regarding diversity and inclusion. They were charged with sharing substantive daily additions throughout the course with friends, peers, and organizations with which they were involved. The professor was the administrator to ensure appropriate content. This was completed after students completed the Race in America I group.
- 6) An entire class of about 30 students developed and performed a flash mob using a motivational Kelly Clarkson song in the student union during lunchtime. The students used this opportunity to demonstrate through dance, expression, props, and music that, as they stated, we are all in this together, so we need to be supportive of one another. These students participated in a variety of Voices groups.
- 7) Four students competed in the University of South Dakota's Business School Innovation in Business Competition and were finalists with a microaffirmation app that they developed. These students participated in the Microaggressions in Everyday Life group and wanted to come up with a comprehensive way to share microaffirmations across the campus and potentially worldwide. They were the only participants not from the Business School in the competition, and they received praise for innovation in inclusion.
- 8) An entire class of about 30 students developed The Stay Weird Campaign after participating in a variety of Voices groups. The students made t-shirts to distribute with a logo and message of inclusion. In conjunction, they developed the next item.
- 9) The class above created a YouTube video of them performing and dancing with a message of diversity and inclusion using the song Brave by Sara Bareilles.
- 10) Two students organized an International/National student dinner/dance after they realized that they knew few people on campus from other countries. They participated in the National/International Voices group and were interested in not only meeting people from different backgrounds than theirs, but they also established a way for those students to meet one another.

## **Summary**

Educational training programs in health sciences require students to be engaged in hands-on practical experience to graduate the best people in the health professions. "Teachers can communicate concepts and information. Changing one's perspective and expanding one's framework for understanding reality more often comes from the students personally engaging challenges they view as significant," (Kronick, 2007). The goal is to produce doctors, nurses,

occupational therapists, and other health professionals who have real-world experience from the start. The Inclusive Excellence Incubator is an effort to provide experiential service-learning opportunities while positively impacting issues of campus diversity. The IEI works well with diversity awareness educational and training initiatives that allows for socially conscious individuals to make a difference in their campus community. In this paper, the author connected the incubator with the Voices of Discovery Intergroup Dialogue Program, a small group dialogue-based and co-curricular diversity awareness program that engages students in topics of diversity. It is clear the incubator works well when coupled with an intergroup initiative. However, it is important to keep in mind that the Inclusive Excellence Incubator has the potential to be robust and can probably be connected to diversity retreats, day-long diversity workshops, diversity courses, and other social justice training efforts.

Action must be at the heart of social justice training. The Inclusive Excellence Incubator is designed to contribute to engaged citizens and a more informed, compassionate campus, world, and society.

---

About the author: Laurie Lind is the Senior Financial Officer and Senior Diversity Consultant for The LinD (Leadership in Diversity) Group, a Diversity and Inclusion Consulting Firm for Higher Education, Business, and Non-Profit Agencies. She can be contacted at her email address: [laurielind@thelindgroup.com](mailto:laurielind@thelindgroup.com).

## References

Bauman, G.L., Bustillos, L.T., Bensimon, E.M., M. Christopher Brown II, and Bartee, R.D. 2005. Achieving equitable educational outcomes with all students: The institution's roles and responsibilities. Association of American Colleges and Universities: Washington, D.C.

Kronick, R.F. Service learning and the university student. *College Student Journal* 41(2), 296-305.

Maxwell, K.E., Biren, (Ratnesh) Nagda A., and Thompson, M.C. 2011. Facilitating intergroup dialogues: Building bridges, catalyzing change. Stylus Publishing: Sterling, Virginia.

Milem, J.F., Chang, M.J. and Lising, A. 2005. Making diversity work on campus: A research-based perspective. Association of American Colleges and Universities: Washington, DC.

Williams, D.A., Berger, J.B. and McClendon, S.A. 2005. Toward a Model of Inclusive Excellence and Change in Postsecondary Institutions. Association of American Colleges and Universities: Washington, DC.



# APPENDIX

## Inclusive Excellence Incubator Rubric Professor's Course Professor's Name

Group: Student Names	Voices Group	Meeting Time and Day

Description of Proposed Project	Group Project Objectives	Learning Outcomes	Professor Input/Permission	Action	Paper
---------------------------------	--------------------------	-------------------	----------------------------	--------	-------
