

## **Incorporating DEI Issues into the Business School Curriculum: Possibilities, Issues and Lessons Learned from One Initiative**

### **ABSTRACT**

Business Schools are seeking the best ways to incorporate Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) content into the curriculum. We launched an initiative in Fall 2021 that involved our incoming students by creating DEI content and activities into our new Introduction to Business class. We drew on the expertise of a corporate partner as well as of our campus's VP for Diversity. We obtained quantitative and qualitative responses from students about the content. This experience provides a framework for discussion of a variety of questions about how to effectively bring DEI awareness and content into the business curriculum.

### **KEYWORDS**

DEI in Curriculum, Freshmen, Corporate Partnership

### **INTRODUCTION**

Business Schools in the United States and elsewhere are seeking the best ways to incorporate content about Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) issues into the curriculum. Techniques used to bring DEI into business curriculum include stand-alone courses, inclusion of DEI material in the most logical courses (organization behavior, leadership, marketing), efforts to integrate DEI in all business classes, and extracurricular activities (panels, students clubs, mentoring programs, DEI training). Faculty and staff are also seeking high-quality, effective DEI material that will achieve stated goals.

We are implementing a variety of these approaches toward inclusion of DEI content into our curriculum. One that was new and that engaged most of our incoming students was creating content and activities for four class sessions of our new Introduction to Business course, which

most new students were scheduled into. We drew on the expertise of a corporate partner (PwC) as well as of our campus's VP for Diversity. At the end of the semester, we obtained detailed quantitative and qualitative information from the students on their reactions to this content. This experience provides a framework for discussion of a variety of questions about how to effectively bring DEI awareness and content into the business curriculum.

## **OVERVIEW OF EXISTING APPROACHES TO DEI IN THE BUSINESS CLASSROOM AND TEACHING IMPLICATIONS**

How to better include DEI topics and awareness in business education is an issue that has gained currency in recent years, as seen in the following: conference themes (AACSB Diversity Conference, SUNY Business School Deans' conference, MOBTS current conference theme), discussions in the academic literature, professional organization articles (Pope, 2020), as well as seminars and papers by Business Schools themselves (e.g., Akinola, et.al, 2019). A growing literature exists focused on gender issues and female representation in cases taught in Business School classes; for the most part, attention on this gender issue started prior to the lens being trained on DEI in business cases (Hansra, et al, 2019; Symons, 2016; Symons and Ibarra, 2014; Sharen and McGowan, 2019; MacLellan, 2018).

Ways of better including DEI in Business School classes include: more diversity in examples/problems used, in textbooks, in cases, specialized courses, and using diverse student teams (<https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/what-administrators-and-educators-can-do-now-to-drive-progress-on-diversity>, 12/20/21; Center for Equity, Gender and Leadership, May 2020; "HBS Case Studies Need Diversity - Now," 2017; Soule, et al 2019; Fernhaber and Hines, 2021).

Training faculty and staff to incorporate this material into classes can be challenging. There are concerted efforts at Schools to hire more diverse faculty and staff, so they can serve as role models, and with the perception (rightly or wrongly) that they might have a better understanding of DEI issues and business content. Strong efforts are also being made to diversify the students in the classroom, to bring different experiences and points of view to the business material (GMAC, 2018).

As academics in business disciplines endeavor to effectively integrate DEI content into their courses, two additional resources can be helpful: corporate partners and campus Diversity Offices. Corporations have taken a lead on the DEI issue and have invested time and money into developing effective training and content. And campus Diversity Offices have general expertise in the topic which they can usefully employ in partnership with business faculty.

### **Incorporating DEI into the first year Introduction to Business Class: One approach**

With these factors in mind, we used the opportunity created by our first time ever offering of an Introduction to Business class for our incoming students in Fall 2021. Our objective was to create awareness among freshmen (and some transfers) that DEI was a key aspect of whatever area of business they entered. We have other DEI content initiatives in upper level classes, but we wanted our new students to have a clear understanding of the value we placed on these issues.

Two sections of the Introduction to Business course were run, in face-to-face classes. One had over 100 students, the other 45. We worked with two Business Advisory Council members who were partners at PwC for the first two segments offered on DEI. These sessions were held via Zoom, as the presenters could not travel to our location. Both partners (one an alum) participated in both sessions. The first segment gave an overview of the firm and its

commitment to DEI, and how that manifested. A DEI expert trainer from PwC ran the students through some exercises and basic concepts which were designed to create awareness of differences and how everyone makes assumptions. The second session featured a panel of PwC employees of color (including one alum) who shared their experiences in the firm. Questions were fielded in both sessions.

Our second segment, which followed the PwC sessions, featured two classes held in person and run by our campus Chief Diversity officer, an individual who spends a great deal of time working with students. Concepts were discussed, but each class also featured awareness creating exercises done individually and in pairs.

### Survey Results

A survey was administered at the end of the course for both sections of students. Students were given time in class to complete the survey. A number of the open and close-ended questions related to the DEI content of the course. Results were mostly positive, but also raised questions and pointed to areas of improvement in the future.

### Quantitative results (results combined for both sections)

#### PricewaterhouseCoopers DEI Presentations

	Yes	No
Was the information they provided clear and understandable?	119 <b>97%</b>	4 <b>4%</b>
Did it help you have a better understanding of DEI issues?	109 <b>87%</b>	16 <b>13%</b>
Did it provide insight on how you can advance DEI?	106 <b>88%</b>	15 <b>12%</b>

	Positive Response	Negative Response	Neutral
What if any impact did their presentations have on your level of commitment to advancing DEI?	77 <b>67%</b>	38 <b>33%</b>	
What was your overall reaction to the presentation by the PwC partners?	87 <b>74%</b>	21 <b>18%</b>	9 <b>8%</b>

What was your overall reaction to the panel of PwC new employees?	83 <b>75%</b>	12 <b>11%</b>	16 <b>14%</b>
Should a presentation by PwC be included in the course next year?	80 <b>69%</b>	24 <b>21%</b>	12 <b>10%</b>

### Chief Diversity Officer routenberg's DEI Presentation

	Yes	No
Was the information they provided clear and understandable?	119 <b>98%</b>	3 <b>2%</b>
Did they help you have a better understanding of DEI at our institution?	106 <b>88%</b>	15 <b>12%</b>
Did they provide insight on how you can advance DEI at our institution?	104 <b>84%</b>	20 <b>16%</b>
What, if any, impact did their presentations have on your commitment to advancing DEI?	75 <b>65%</b>	40 <b>35%</b>
Do you believe you could explain to a new student our Institution's Community Commitment to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion?	108 <b>89%</b>	13 <b>11%</b>
Did their talks repeat what you had already learned at our institution, or elsewhere?	93 <b>78%</b>	27 <b>22%</b>

### Qualitative

- routenberg was in person, which students found more engaging and participatory, PwC was via Zoom.
- Definitely thought one day of PwC was enough.
- Want new material, liked seeing Geneseo's Diversity video, which most had not seen.
- A small core of negative respondents...based on comments and quantitative.

### Issues Raised and Posed for Session Discussion

While overall students responded positively to the DEI material presented in the new Introduction to Business class, a number of issues were raised that we need to think about going forward and which should provide topics for the roundtable discussions.

**Sensitivity of raising issues of diversity** in the classroom; many faculty don't feel comfortable or trained to discuss issues of DEI. For some faculty from other countries, DEI takes on a different context and history.

**Benefits of bringing in experts**, in this case the VP for Diversity and our corporate partner, PwC and their expert trainers, to assist faculty. Having alumni on the program also added credibility.

For students of all backgrounds, **a strong need for psychological safety in the classroom** needs to exist for them to share their thoughts. We want students to feel safe expressing opinions and feeling that they are heard, although no one is expected to have their mind changed. Providing more self-awareness and context were our goals. We wanted to encourage students to see various points of view. Size of class may matter.

**Exercises** were done, individually and in pairs, for the last two classes and received positive feedback. A need exists for more such exercises, ones shown to be effective.

**Timing:** We carried out these sessions toward the end of the semester when the class was more comfortable with the instructor and potentially their peers. There are pros and cons to this.

**Is this the right course to put this information into?** Many students indicated they've heard the same message either in high school, during orientation or elsewhere. How much is too much? We don't want to turn students off.

**Assessment of effectiveness of the material presented:** Our survey gave us a good indication of how students felt soon after they had been exposed. It doesn't tell us what kind of foundation the material might have laid for future learning and growth in this area. The content was included in the final exam.

**Follow-up in other parts of the curriculum:** Ideally this content would be mapped throughout the entire curriculum, with this course laying the foundation. We wonder if other schools have done this already.

**What we wished we had done:** Originally we had envisioned having small group discussions facilitated by trained students and faculty, to allow students to truly express their thoughts. This proved logistically too challenging.

### **SESSION DESCRIPTION**

We will present a short overview of possible ways of incorporating DEI into business school curricula. We then describe one initiative made at our School, where we intentionally created four DEI sessions in our new Introduction to Business class, required of all our incoming students. We discuss the goals, implementation, and student survey results of our initiative. We then open up the roundtable to discussion of techniques used by roundtable participants, with emphasis on what has worked as well as what challenges have emerged.

### **Session Timeline**

Introductions: 5 minutes

Topic and relevant literature: 7 minutes

Our initiative described, goals, challenges, student survey results: 18 minutes

Roundtable participants' discussion: 30 minutes

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