



Research Article

Improving Inclusivity and Engagement through Faculty Learning Communities

Michael Slavkin* 

Department of Psychological Science and Counseling, Marian University, Indianapolis, United States

Abstract

During the 2024-2025 academic year, faculty and staff at an American midwestern private Catholic institution began meeting to systematically examine the culture of the campus community, paying special attention to feelings of equity, inclusion, and engagement by faculty. The discussions in these faculty learning communities (FLC) aim to foster an inclusive, just, and safe learning environment for the university's classrooms and community. In general, the goal of the learning communities was that each FLC used data-driven or evidence-based approaches to identify areas of strength (to continue supporting) and areas of challenges (that need attention) on campus. The focus of the work was to improve the dynamics of the classroom, or within the structure of courses/curriculum, but conversations lead beyond the classroom as well. Findings indicate that while participants expressed strong endorsement of inclusive dialogue and collaboration, levels of comfort and engagement varied. Although all participants identified as Caucasian and reported limited cross-racial social experiences, they overwhelmingly valued the opportunity to engage in structured conversations about race and equity. Some participants acknowledged difficulty listening to opposing viewpoints or challenging discriminatory language, suggesting a gap between espoused beliefs and enacted practices. Despite these tensions, participants described increased collegiality, mentorship, and institutional connection as significant outcomes of FLC participation. Conversations about the limits of faculty and staff DEI awareness and its implications for student engagement are addressed.

Keywords

Learning Community, Equity, Inclusion, Microaggressions, Faculty Engagement

1. Overview

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact of learning communities at a small liberal arts institution, and their impact on the culture of faculty and staff relationships. Learning communities were formed to create dialogue, interest, and reflection among the university faculty and staff to examine effective, equitable, inclusive, and anti-racist teaching. These communities discussed diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) concepts; examined their own experiences

around DEI, and present how other faculty and staff throughout the institution could grow. In addition to creating a supportive and welcoming environment for all on campus, the paper will examine how communities had the chance to process, reflect on ideas, and develop collegiality. The authors address how beneficial it is to find support from others in the university community, and. It is essential for all on campus to see others who they can connect with and find similarity.

*Correspondence: Michael Slavkin (mslavkin@marian.edu)

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Further, the learning communities can provide a systematic process of mentoring and support, advancing the balance between teaching, research, and service and examining formally the process of tenure and promotion. Finally, the groups were able to consider how that information can be used to validate the need for similar groups to assist with DEI practices on campus.

Faculty Learning Communities

Faculty and staff on the university's campus began meeting during early Fall 2024. Conversations between faculty and staff opened the door to discussions on issues of inclusivity, anti-racist teaching, as well as equitable assessment on campus. It was discovered that during this initial period some groups were more engaged in forming relationships than others. The learning communities were meant to create safe and supportive environment that allowed faculty and staff to learn and grow. What was it about some groups that made it more difficult for the members to participate? Although some communities were created to combat discrimination and ignorance, other members may already have had these experiences. Similarly, differences in beginning with the group may have looked different based on the unique challenges tied to their roles on campus, as the beginning of the semester and that time of year might be more challenging for certain staff. Such differences in campus positions deter them from participating.

Campus Culture and Student Success

Various experiences and factors impact the feel of a campus for students, faculty, and staff members. Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth highlight the significance of both academic and non-academic factors in performance and retention [1]. These findings indicate how non-academic factors, such as social support within the institution and social involvement, have a positive relationship to retention of various members of a post-secondary education community. Further, Lundbery explains that when institutions that values diversity are paired with approachable and helpful faculty and staff can lead to an increase in learning for students of color [2]. The environment of the institution also plays an integral part in student success and retention. Hurtado, Cullar & Guillermo-Wann found that validation inside the classroom and on campus makes a significant difference in ensuring that those from diverse backgrounds feel included [3].

Comeaux and Harrison found that few previous studies have explored the differences between educational expectations, campus climate issues, and academic engagement practices related to academic success [4]. Failure to distinguish between these multiple influences on academic success has frequently led to negative assumptions about students and faculty of color. Comeaux found that Black students contend with campus racial climate and often feel low academic expectations by faculty and staff. At times, these campus staff may not be aware of the implicit biases they hold [5]. The study reinforced the need to develop meaningful relationships between faculty, staff, and students. Further, limited percep-

tions by faculty and staff can be unintentional, but are nonetheless examples of microaggressions students of color face. Students (and faculty alike) who experience microaggressions can feel less comfort and may be less willing to participate in open conversations about issues about racism and discrimination. Locke and Trolan share that microaggressions are verbal, behavioral, and/or environmental slights and indignities that can be intentional or unintentional but still derogatory and harmful towards a specific individual or group [6]. While increasing student and faculty awareness is usually a college or university's goal, when microaggressions are not addressed, students and faculty of color feel marginalized and unwelcome.

For all students and faculty to feel safe and comfortable as members of the community, microaggressions on campus must be addressed. According to Cook-Sather, Des-Ogugua, and Bahti an intervention called "Advocating Diversity in Higher Education" was developed to positively reinforce the concept of diversity and create a sense of inclusion among students during and after the intervention. The intervention was used to combat discrimination on campus using intersectionality and close relationships. Discrimination can be fought using education and spreading information across campus in ways that approach it as a subject that can be lectured and taught, not just something to be punished [7].

Discrimination, comfort, and academic success are tied together. In a study done by Cheng, McDermott, Wong, and McCullough, a relationship between Latinx students' academic success and the discrimination they report was found [8]. Similarly, Muslim students find themselves constantly working to make sure their peers even are comfortable with their presence on campus [9]. Students belonging to the Latinx and Muslim community each report feelings of isolation and self-consciousness, and it may be difficult for someone to open up about discrimination and share individual experiences when they do not feel like they are truly a part of the community. The same scenario also has been shown for students belonging to the LGBTQ+ community. Homophobia and harassment that students experience can be verbal and even physical; treatment such as this makes it hard for them to adjust to life on campus [10].

Discrimination is commonly perceived as being racial, but it also can be based on sex. Title IX, the law that prohibits sex-based discrimination in educational institutions, includes activism regarding sexually violent acts and the statistical mistreatment of women on college campuses. While many schools lecture women on how to act, protect themselves, and avoid unsafe situations; those who attack rarely are lectured to or punished [11]. Female students who have experienced sex-based discrimination may not feel comfortable sharing and participating in a learning community meant to represent a school they do not feel appreciates or respects them.

Strategies to Advancing Campus Community

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the reasons members of the learning communities may not be as willing to

share as others, while also investigating ways to improve inclusivity on the university's campus. When one university succeeds, others can follow with similar practices. The goal is not just to end discrimination, but to increase the level of comfort for students and faculty belonging to marginalized groups on campus.

Equitable Access. Every student should have the same opportunities to learn as any other student, regardless of race, socioeconomic background, or preparedness. How do students develop the knowledge and skills to be transformative leaders, and does this apply to *ALL* students at “the university”? What are effective approaches, barriers, structures, and spaces to equitable learning at “the university”? We hope this group explores these questions, and many more.

Equitable Assessment. Student populations across the country are getting more diverse. Are all forms of assessment inclusive of diverse learners? How do we determine if there are any biases in our assessment practices? How do we use assessment tools to enhance student learning and inclusivity? We hope this group explores these questions, and many more.

Faculty, Staff, and Student Experience. Student voice matters. Students have perspectives that may shed light on our teaching practices. Let's hear them! This FLC will be led by 2-3 faculty or staff, which will partner with a small group of students. Together, they will examine how to best collect student voices, data, surveys, and other information that might best describe students' feelings of inclusion and equity at “the university”.

2. Methods

Participants

The university is one of the more racially diverse liberal arts institutions in the state, with 11.3 percent of students identifying as African-American students and 6.7 percent as Hispanic American. With the inclusion of 4.3 percent multi-ethnic students and 2.1 percent International students, the total of racial and ethnically diverse students on campus is over 22 percent of The university students, making the institution the most racially diverse liberal arts college in the Midwest. However, the racial and ethnic diversity of faculty and staff is not nearly as representative. Of 638 faculty at “the university”, 553 are white, 52 are Black or African American, 17 are Asian, and 16 are Multi-Ethnic. The racial diversity of faculty and staff at The university comes to 13.3 percent.

Current membership in the Faculty Learning Communities included 30 faculty and staff members who volunteered during the 2024-2025 academic year. Faculty and staff were not compensated for this work. Participants were found to be advocates for greater support and encouragement of diversity, equity and inclusive practices on campus. Funding was provided through a Lilly Grant initiative. Seven members of the Faculty Learning Communities agreed to participate in the study. Of those who participated, five were female and two were male. All seven participants were Caucasian, with no

one reporting as Hispanic or Latino. Six of the participants identified as heterosexual and one identified as bisexual. Participants ranged in age from mid 20s to mid 50s. Four participants were faculty members and three were staff. Of the seven participants, six completed the full survey.

Procedure

The research protocol used for the current study was guided by an exploratory mixed methods design. Researchers have established rapport and identified goals with key administrators, staff, and faculty prior to conducting the research; in order to ensure that the program could be successfully established. These relationships are critical in advancing engagement as participants in the study.

Interview Guide. The instrument used to collect the data were modified from Carter-Francique et al. [12]. Participants were interviewed by researchers and complete a 10-min demographic questionnaire and one 45-min audiotaped semi-structured interview. The demographic questionnaire will consist of information (e.g., departmental membership, faculty or staff classification) and personal demographic information. The subsequent semi-structured interview focused around the four areas of inclusive practices outlined in the study overview. Narratives that proceed from these conversations were used to understand the participants' perceptions of their academic experiences to understand the persons who assisted or mentored them through designed their collegiate program, provided them social support, and opportunities for early intervention/prevention. Learning community members were asked directly about how their racial identity uniquely intersects with their college experience.

Plan for Analysis. Individual interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using phenomenological approach methods. Four steps were utilized to align with this approach (1) reading the transcript(s) in full to identify “whole” meanings; (2) re-visiting the transcript(s) to identify meaningful units to the experiences reported; (3) reflecting on said units to gather insight; (4) synthesizing and integrating reflections into narrative statements for the experiences in question [13]. The primary researchers will utilize coding and thematic analysis, which is consistent with qualitative analysis, in order to identify categories and themes that emerge [14].

By exploring the systems currently in place for recruiting, admitting, supporting, and graduating students, researchers will develop a broad picture of themes, protocols and procedures that span the university campus. Researchers will create visual representations and narrative descriptions of these protocols and points of intervention, which can be layered with narratives provided and used to guide recommendations.

Diverse Learning Environments Survey (DLE). The data sourced for this study was gathered using the Diverse Learning Environments survey (DLE). A national survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at UCLA, the DLE examines participants' perceptions of institutional climate, as well as campus practices as experienced with faculty, staff, and peers. The instrument is based on studies of

diverse student bodies and the complex issues that arise from aspects related to the climate for diversity, including experiences with discrimination, cross-racial interactions, validation and sense of belonging. The DLE also collects information about institutional practices, as well as examining the integration.

of learning, social action, and civic engagement. The survey was administered online.

Narrative Interviews. As a component supporting the work of committees and utilizing a mixed-method approach, the investigators will conduct narrative interviews with participants using a methodology designed by Carter-Francique et al. [12]. The primary framework was to use a phenomenological approach, within a constructivist-interpretivism paradigm, using a Critical Race Theoretical orientation [15, 16]. Utilizing a phenomenological approach allowed for examination of racial and race-related experiences from the unique perspective of student-participants, and offers participants the opportunity to self-describe narratives and ascribe complex meaning of their learning community experience at the university [17]. The constructivist-interpretivism paradigm requires interaction and interpretation of the researcher and participants, which requires researcher reflexivity around personal values, biases, and experiences as university faculty, in order to minimize researcher bias.

As a theoretical framework, CRT centers on the influence of race and racialized influences in the student-athlete experience. Utilizing critical race theory will allow researchers to conceptualize the ways in which Black participants experience their academic and athletic career, and that these experiences likely intersect with systemic discrimination, rather than taking a color-blind approach [18]. CRT utilizes five tenets, within the context of education: (1) race and racism as central to its intersection with other forms of subordination; (2) challenges dominant ideology in educational systems; (3) focuses on social justice as a core goal; (4) focuses on experiential information and knowledge; (5) is an interdisciplinary approach/perspective [19].

3. Results

Although only seven of 30 members participated, the results from this first year of the Faculty Learning Communities are still valuable. Responses to the racial background questions showed 42 percent of participants agreed that they found it hard to listen to points of view that were not their own, while 30 percent disagreed, and 15 percent strongly disagreed. An equal number of participants recognize the importance of being open to hearing and facilitating conversations that represent a variety of beliefs. Three-quarters of the participants agreed they have a clear sense of their racial/ethnic background and what it means to them, with one quarter disagreeing. It is usually found that if faculty and staff are not comfortable with their racial background, it can be difficult to facilitate conversations about DEI issues.

All participants either agreed or strongly agreed they would rather have someone share their conflicting views on campus than to feel they had to remain silent. 57 percent of participants either strongly disagreed or disagreed that they had a strong attachment to their own racial/ethnic group, while a quarter of participants agreed. Four out of five participants agreed or strongly agreed they could help people from different groups use conflict constructively.

On the topic of learning setting, all participants (self-identified as Caucasian) who completed the entire survey said they have never been in a situation where they have been the only person of their race/ethnicity. One quarter of participants claimed they seldom spend time trying to learn more about their own racial/ethnic identity, with half suggesting that they were interested sometimes, and one quarter of participants chose often and very often. Participants shared limited personal activism when asked. While the majority of participants indicated that it was important to challenge others who use derogatory comments on campus, one quarter answered seldom to never when challenge discrimination. One out of 7 participants admitted to sometimes using language that reinforces negative stereotypes. However, all participants answered often or very often to making efforts to educate themselves about other groups.

Out of those participants who completed the survey, half answered that they have sometimes heard others on campus using disparaging language. The majority of participants claimed they have seldom heard faculty and staff making insensitive or disparaging remarks. A large majority of participants stated that they have never heard faculty or staff making insensitive or disparaging remarks. Lastly, on the topic of racial/ethnic beliefs, the questions probed the participants' interactions with people outside their own race/ethnic group. All of the participants shared they had never dated or been intimately involved with someone outside their own racial/ethnic group. Three said they had never socialized or partied with someone outside their own racial/ethnic group, and three said they had never studied or prepared for class with someone outside their racial/ethnic group. One-third of participants responded seldom to both dining/having a meal with someone of a different race/ethnicity and having meaningful and honest discussions about race/ethnicity outside of class. Over half of participants responded with sometimes or often to having meaningful and honest discussions about race/ethnicity outside of class. A similar number of participants responded with never to having tense, somewhat hostile interactions with people of different race/ethnic groups, but one responded with seldom and one responded with sometimes.

Based on the results of this study, faculty and staff not only benefited from advancing DEI related work on campus but had a secondary benefit of mentoring and modeling collaboration on campus. For example, one participant shared, "I have really appreciated the opportunity to collaborate with staff and faculty across campus, and to get a sense that others

are also interested in DEI work. [The Faculty Learning Committee] have been encouraging to me.” Another participant shared a stronger sense of community, “The community has provided a great opportunity for me to learn more about our faculty and staff. I feel more closely connected to campus after participating. I feel like I better know how to access support across the institution as well as advocate for my students. While I don't know that I have gained as much knowledge about DEI, I feel like I have a strong community supporting my efforts to be engaged in making a difference for the marginalized groups on campus.” Faculty and staff felt that their work was meaningful and that the community assisted in advancing a common cause across multiple areas of the institution.

4. Discussion

The question brought to light by this study was why some members of FLCs are willing to share and communicate openly about diversity, equity, and inclusion while others are not as comfortable with those conversations. The question itself is hard to answer definitively due to the number of participants, but the information gathered by the survey is still telling. The results show that even in communities designed to encourage equitable conversations of diversity and inclusivity, some faculty and staff are not comfortable with processing these areas. Further training and education around these conversations is warranted. Further, because all of the members who chose to participate in this study were Caucasian, which offers an insightful glance into the workings of the FLCs. However, further consideration of members from diverse backgrounds, other races, and ethnic groups is critical. Caucasian participants admitted they have never had an intimate or romantic relationship with someone belonging to a different race/ethnic group. Half of the participants admitted to never partying/socializing/studying with people belonging to other races/ethnic groups. Such results demonstrate that integrated experiences still do not always occur socially. The results seem to show as if there may be a divide on campus, which shows The university still experiences the long-lasting results of racial discrimination, or at the very least, a discomfort for members of learning communities to address what is not comfortable to them. What may be uncomfortable isn't always easy to address. Further conversations on campus should address how complicated relationships are between diverse groups; whether students and faculty/staff, different based on background, etc..

Some participants admitted to hearing both students and faculty/staff using insensitive language or disparaging remarks; use of such language can impact a person of color's level of comfort or feeling safe, even if the comment was heard just once. Each participant brought attention to an example or reason as to why some members of the FLCs are not comfortable sharing information or participating as much. However, because all participants were Caucasian, the in-

formation does not give voice to the members belonging to different races and ethnicities. The results of this study show that the university as a community is not immune to discrimination, whether it comes in the form of microaggression or obvious discrimination, which can affect members of the FLC's chosen level of participation.

Ongoing conversations between faculty, staff, and students should begin to advance diversity, equity, and inclusive practices. Creating safe spaces on campus where students from all backgrounds can feel valued and heard is essential. The use of a campus DEI community to initiate practices that ensure all students are valued. Further conversations and strategies to support all faculty, staff, and students on campus need to occur.

The national political climate during the presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021) significantly shaped discourse surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) across college campuses in the United States. Institutions of higher education have historically functioned as spaces for critical inquiry, civic engagement, and the open exchange of ideas. However, during this period, conversations about race, immigration, gender identity, and systemic inequities became increasingly polarized in public and political arenas. This polarization extended into higher education contexts, where faculty reported heightened tensions when facilitating classroom discussions related to diversity and social justice. The ability to discuss issues of power, privilege, and structural inequality was often perceived as politically charged, leaving some faculty feeling scrutinized, challenged, or constrained in expressing their professional and personal commitments to inclusive pedagogy.

The broader sociopolitical climate influenced how diversity-related initiatives were interpreted within academic spaces. National rhetoric regarding immigration policy, racial justice movements, and critiques of critical race theory shaped public perceptions of DEI work. Faculty who incorporated content related to systemic racism, intersectionality, or social inequities into their curricula sometimes encountered resistance from students who viewed such discussions as partisan rather than scholarly. This shift created a complex teaching environment in which faculty had to navigate not only pedagogical goals but also concerns about institutional backlash, student evaluations, and reputational risk. The perceived politicization of diversity conversations contributed to a sense of vulnerability among educators, particularly those whose scholarship or identities were directly connected to marginalized communities.

Research on campus climate underscores that institutional environments are shaped by both internal culture and external sociopolitical forces [3]. During periods of national division, faculty may experience greater hesitation in facilitating open dialogue, especially when discussions intersect with students' deeply held political beliefs. In some cases, faculty reported self-censoring or moderating classroom discussions to avoid conflict. While academic freedom remains a foundational

principle of higher education, the lived experience of faculty during this era suggests that freedom to engage in diversity-focused discourse was perceived as increasingly fraught. For faculty of color and other marginalized identities, these tensions were often compounded by personal experiences with discrimination and microaggressions, further complicating their ability to engage openly in dialogue.

Within this context, Faculty Learning Communities (FLCs) emerged as structured spaces for support, reflection, and collective growth. These communities were designed to foster dialogue around inclusive teaching, equitable assessment, and anti-racist pedagogy. Importantly, FLCs provided a semi-private forum in which faculty and staff could process experiences, share challenges, and examine their own positionalities. The results of the present study suggest that such communities may function as protective and affirming environments during politically contentious periods. Participants frequently described the value of collegial support and the opportunity to collaborate across campus roles. In a climate where public discourse around diversity was polarized, these communities offered relational grounding and professional affirmation.

At the same time, findings indicate that even within intentionally inclusive spaces, discomfort and hesitation persisted. Some participants acknowledged difficulty engaging with perspectives different from their own, and others reported limited cross-racial social experiences. These findings highlight the enduring influence of racial and social segregation in both personal and professional domains. When faculty lack meaningful cross-cultural engagement in their own lives, facilitating complex discussions about race and inequity in the classroom may feel particularly challenging. Moreover, when national narratives frame diversity efforts as controversial or divisive, individuals may internalize uncertainty about how their perspectives will be received.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a useful lens for interpreting these dynamics [15, 16]. CRT posits that racism is embedded within social systems and that challenges to dominant ideologies often generate resistance. During the Trump presidency, public critiques of CRT and related frameworks intensified, contributing to heightened sensitivity around race-related discourse. Faculty who adopted CRT-informed pedagogies may have felt particularly scrutinized. Yet, the core tenets of CRT—centering experiential knowledge, challenging dominant ideology, and pursuing social justice—align closely with the goals of inclusive learning communities. Thus, FLCs may serve as counterspaces that affirm scholarly approaches marginalized in broader political discourse.

The data also reveal a paradox. While participants overwhelmingly expressed support for open dialogue and inclusive values, some acknowledged limited activism or reluctance to challenge discriminatory language consistently. This gap between belief and action may reflect broader cultural tensions. When diversity conversations are framed as politi-

cally risky, individuals may hesitate to intervene publicly, even if they endorse inclusive principles privately. The Trump-era climate may have amplified such hesitation, as public debates frequently portrayed diversity initiatives as ideological rather than educational.

Despite these challenges, the findings underscore the resilience of faculty committed to advancing inclusive excellence. Participants described increased feelings of connection, mentorship, and institutional advocacy through their involvement in FLCs. These outcomes suggest that structured communities can buffer against external political pressures by reinforcing shared values and fostering collective efficacy. In times of national polarization, institutions of higher education bear responsibility for sustaining environments where dialogue across difference is not only permitted but encouraged [20-23].

Ultimately, the ability to discuss diversity on college campuses is not solely determined by institutional policy; it is deeply intertwined with the broader sociopolitical context. During the presidency of Donald Trump, faculty navigated a landscape in which conversations about race, equity, and inclusion were frequently contested. The present study highlights both the constraints and possibilities inherent in such a climate. While some faculty felt challenged or constrained, learning communities provided a meaningful avenue for reflection, solidarity, and growth. Continued investment in structured dialogue, mentorship, and inclusive pedagogy remains essential to ensuring that campuses fulfill their mission as spaces of critical inquiry and equitable engagement.

Abbreviations

FLC	Faculty Learning Communities
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
CRT	Critical Race Theory

Author Contributions

Michael Slavkin: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal Analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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