

Addressing Equity and Inclusion in the Biology Department and in Our Curriculum

The Biology Department is committed to, and inspired by, the work of equity and justice. As we pursue those aims, we simultaneously acknowledge that our discipline is implicated in the foundations of racism, sexism, and constructs of gender in this country. We also acknowledge that our department has often failed to live up to our own ideals and those of Bates College by not creating curricula, practices, or cultures that would support all students, particularly those from minoritized identities, to realize their own goals in our field. We are deeply sorry for the past inequities that we perpetuated through inattention to policies and behaviors that would allow all students to thrive.

To this end, members of the department have passionately engaged in learning and thinking about equity and justice, with an aim of embracing anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-elitist, and anti-heterosexist standards and practices. Here, we share some of the things we have been working on as we build on foundational work by others at Bates. It is crucial for us to convey that we are learning as we move along this path. We know that we will make mistakes, and we will struggle to achieve our aspirations; this awareness sharpens both our humility and our focus as we strive to design a better curriculum and empower ourselves with self-understanding and empathy that will make our department more inclusive and just. We also recognize that the very process of describing some of the approaches we have taken will create the risk of sounding like we are ticking boxes, patting ourselves on the back, or suggesting that the job is finished. None of that describes our mindset about this important, ongoing, and imperfect work.

- We made equity and inclusion a focus of our 2017 departmental self-study and external review. This was helpful as it allowed us to learn from our students, colleagues, and administration about the ways in which our department was not centering evidence-based inclusive and equity-minded practices in our work. We discovered that some students, particularly women students and students of color were experiencing unsupportive learning environments. We learned that elements of our curriculum and courses were not based on best practices for student learning or for creating self-efficacy in our field. We learned that our efforts to create a diversity and inclusion statement, before we had done the hard work of self-reflection, listening to our students, and learning about inclusive pedagogies, was premature and did more harm to our students than good. All of this was difficult for us to learn, but led to substantive dialogue about the lived experiences of our students and it reinforced the need for a humble approach and a growth mindset as we do this work.
- In 2018, we hosted a New Scholars Symposium to bring to campus early-career biologists from underrepresented groups, to talk with students, staff, and faculty and each other about their research, their experiences with career paths in STEM, and ways that we could facilitate change at Bates. We also have been active in campus-wide efforts directed at programmatic and cultural change, with department members working on the STEM Initiative, teaching in STEM Scholars, working on grant proposals to HHMI with a focus on curricular equity, and serving on the leadership team for the current HHMI-funded Inclusive Excellence grant program on campus.

- Importantly, we have been working to revise our core introductory biology curriculum to help students more explicitly build identity and belonging in STEM, to create flexible pathways into the major, and to reduce the extent to which introductory classes perpetuated inequities created by differentially resourced high schools. These new courses create early opportunities for all students to conduct authentic research, a practice that is also known to create inclusion in STEM, and to develop their sense of identity as scientists. We are also working to both highlight the contributions and achievements of BIPOC scientists in our courses and to engage our students in understanding the ways that biology has worked to perpetuate racist, sexist, and other structures, while also emphasizing the ways we can all use our discipline for good. We will continue to examine our curriculum and policies as well as data about student experiences to inform revisions to our grading practices, courses, and lab/field experiences.
- Finally, we have shifted our thinking about hiring processes and job descriptions, to reduce bias and value diversity, to recruit a more representative pool of applicants, and to strongly value experience with inclusive pedagogy. In fall 2019, we were excited to welcome two faculty of color into our department.

The set of activities described here is not comprehensive, and our efforts are ongoing.

We continue to be learners in these areas, which raises the question of what is enabling or impeding progress. One key to progress is that we have moved into a space where the department truly has adopted a growth mindset. We have recognized the importance of learning about the huge body of evidence-based work surrounding best practice in making an inclusive curriculum and classroom. Some of our learning occurred through the STEM Initiative, some through reading/discussion groups and communities of practice, and some through conversations with visiting speakers (e.g., Kimberly Tanner, Bryan Dewsbury, Ibram X. Kendi). Other important learning occurred through data-driven explorations with Bates' Office of Institutional Research, Analysis, and Planning and through racial equity training with the Hackman Consulting Group. Another key to progress has been the engagement of current and former students -- their openness and vulnerability in sharing their frustrations about their lived experiences at Bates, their involvement in curricular redesign, and the extraordinary gift of the Wagener family to create an endowed faculty position in Equity and Inclusion in STEM.

It is also important to identify obstacles to progress. One is that we all have a lot to learn – our own training and expertise is primarily in other fields, and we carry a lot of ignorance about issues of white supremacy, antiracism, sexual orientation, gender identity, and other forms of educational and societal inequity. A related obstacle is time. Educating ourselves about problems and best practices, devising solutions, and putting those changes into practice happens slower than we would like.

Despite obstacles, we are committed to this path, and to continuing to make changes that will center the voices and experiences of our marginalized students and community members.