

## Preparing Future Arts Administrations to Engage in DEI Practices

### Introduction

In our last article for AJAM's Teaching Notes, we shared examples of syllabus statements, class contracts, and introductory discussion activities that have helped each of us improve our teaching to more directly and purposefully center diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) conversations and issues in course content and activities. In this promised second article, we focus more specifically on ways in which our work in classrooms helps prepare arts and culture management students to practice DEI in the professional world of work. Peter Drucker (2014) famously reminded us, "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things." Drucker valued employees - human resources -- as assets, not liabilities. His philosophy viewed people as an organization's most valuable resource to fulfill its mission. He advocated that a manager's role is to prepare people to perform their responsibilities to the best of their ability.

Similarly, as arts and culture management educators, we train our students to set visions and goals for their organizations, programs, and the humans who make the creative work come to life. It is our responsibility to articulate to students how and why it matters that arts and culture organizations center and prioritize Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC), multiple gender and ability identities, and class conscious staff, creators, performers, volunteers, and audiences. There is much to do in this area of education: the arts and culture management sector is predominantly led by White economically privileged men (Cuyler, 2017; Cuyler, A., Durrer, V., & Nisbett, 2020) and the students in our training programs are predominantly White women of economically well-financed backgrounds (Cuyler, A., Durrer, V., & Nisbett, 2020; Dubois, V., 2013). Leading professional associations such as Americans for the Arts (2021) have recently articulated their failures to include minoritized populations and to hoard wealth, access, and leadership. In this Teaching Note, we focus on classroom settings and exercises that can help this dominant population of arts and culture management leaders and students *begin* to practice centering the types of voices identified above. Our suggestions do not encompass the full range of in-depth bias, access, and belonging work that needs to be addressed and enacted. The types of exercises we describe acquaint pre-professional arts and culture workers with introductory practices of breaking down structural norms and including greater variability and possibility of participants in current and future arts and culture settings (Wexler, p. 23). Practicing such exercises benefits not only classroom settings but the future of the field as a whole.

The course activities we suggest have a combined goal to improve leadership practices focused on DEI throughout the arts and culture sector. In considering needed leadership qualities, we narrow our discussion in alignment with the suggestions of Steve Rawlingson, CEO of Samuel Knight International. In his article, *Building the Next Generation of Leaders* (2017), Rawlingson updates Drucker's vision of successful leadership management in concise statements. We have layered our suggested practices toward DEI work onto Rawlingson's generalized "11 rules of leadership." We have selected specific elements of these guidelines in thinking through how to lead with a DEI perspective. Practices we share are focused on a) pursuits of bettering one's environment; b) knowing oneself and one's team; c) giving people (students) tools to succeed;

and d) being part of the solution to problems. Ultimately, these goals and practices are about leaning into discomfort for personal, professional, and organizational growth.

### **The pursuit of bettering your environment**

The idea of improving our environment extends from the classroom settings we create to the ways we teach our students how to work with teams. Thus, one of the first elements to consider in our teaching practices is, very simply, how we organize our classroom setting. Do we give students choice regarding the room arrangement and types of engagements? Do we discuss the ways in which we structure classroom spaces, activities, and assignments the first day (e.g. the class norms we mentioned in our previous AJAM Teaching Notes article)?

These questions include the layout of our classrooms. In other words, does the physical space match the learning outcomes and community building experience that we aim for? As with a stage production, we want our classrooms to evoke the most conducive environment for engaging in the place, space, and time in which we exist and collaborate for that moment. Multiple scholars have talked about how making a room active promotes student activity and engagement (e.g., Cornell, 2002; Harvey & Kenyon, 2013; Rands & Gansemer-Topf, 2017). In addition, Oblinger (2006) argues how the traditional setting in college classrooms (lecture-style) does not relate to how students expect to learn. Moreover, these authors and reports emphasize the importance of eye contact and of small group peer collaboration. Each of these physical elements influences the ways students interact and learn individually and collectively. For example, both SV Flys and Voelker-Morris work to arrange large group classroom seats in horseshoe, semicircle, or full circle patterns, or in small group tablings. Such arrangements allow students to face each other and interact more directly when talking and helps the professor move freely and be seated as part of the group. Flexibility of tables and chairs allows students to rearrange the room for specific activities. Feedback from students and guest speakers about these spatial arrangements has been very positive and has helped to create a sense of classroom community (Barkley, 2010). Furthermore, it has encouraged students to consider the space as a strategy to embrace group and individual work, something that we hope remains sticky (Heath & Heath, 2007) to create positive, collaborative interactions in teamwork and decision-making spaces and processes throughout their professional lives.

Establishing new forms of connecting through space and consistent eye contact among collaborators has also improved students' active listening. To further strengthen active listening, SV Flys has applied the seven norms of collaboration (McKanders, 2020)<sup>1</sup>, and the critical response process from Liz Lerman and John Borstell (2017)<sup>2</sup>. Voelker-Morris has worked with other faculty in her program to collaboratively develop a Working in Teams 2.0 document that outlines steps for active listening such as those offered by Celeste Headlee (2015). No matter the modes or norms used, the goal is that, once students are familiar with these norms/strategies, they will implement them in their future professional settings. Such norms

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<sup>1</sup> Learn more about these norms: <http://theadaptiveschool.weebly.com/7-norms-of-collaborative-work.html>

<sup>2</sup> Learn more about Lerman and the steps of Lerman's Critical Response Process; <https://lizlerman.com/critical-response-process/>

provide grounding for managing polarities that may arise in an organization. Including these norms as part of classroom activities show students how to find a common ground regarding a topic. These practices have been extremely helpful to students understanding that “leadership should be the humble, authentic expression....in pursuit of bettering whatever environment you are in” (Rawlingson, 2017). Practicing such strategies has been well-accepted by students and provided them with practice in leadership strategies that aid positive organizational self-mediation when conflicts arise across differences of identity, opinion, or experience.

### **Knowing your team and yourself well**

Further leadership strengths in addressing conflicts and in centering previously minoritized staff and participants in the arts and culture sector is also about, “knowing your team and yourself, and doing your best job to set both up for success” (Rawlingson, 2017). Recent research on the skills leaders need establishes the increasing importance of inner resources of the psyche such as self-awareness and self-mastery (Eurich, 2018). Introspection is an important tool to engage prior to positively contributing to diversity and inclusion efforts (see for example, Murray-Larrier, 2021). Cultural competency is being aware of and inclusive of those around you. Both of us include different types of skill, identity, or strength assessments when creating student groups or work teams. It is our opinion that these types of assessments can help students identify individual and group strengths and weaknesses. This self-knowledge can help empower an individual’s or group’s success, offsetting weaknesses and building on cultural wealth and the diversity of talents, knowledge, and backgrounds. Students are asked to examine and reflect upon their work, management, or leadership styles related to the work of the specific course and group of students. Students are asked to consider the ways in which they speak to others or engage in community placemaking and involvement practices and the ways in which they interpret or act on policy or board governance. Giving students opportunities to navigate varied sociocultural identities in classroom activities and group work supports them in navigating richly diverse professional settings they will encounter during internships and jobs. These kinds of course activities ask students to engage in self-assessment regarding their learning about themselves as well as their cultural awareness of others.

Of course, asking students to conduct self-evaluation of their DEI knowledge, practices, and engagement cannot be enacted successfully unless the faculty member is conducting similar self-assessment. Voelker-Morris’ home institution has implemented a new course evaluation system (University of Oregon Office of the Provost, 2020). Rather than quantitative responses and evaluative metrics previously employed, the new Continuous Improvement and Evaluation of Teaching (CIET) tool provides an opportunity for instructors to describe term successes and future improvements as well as how their teaching aligns with the institution's definition of teaching excellence to be professional, inclusive, engaged, and research-informed. The CIET reflection involves the instructor’s voice to inform and interpret student feedback. This faculty reflection process assisted Voelker-Morris in identifying some challenges that existed in a Professional Development course focused on DEI issues in the workplace. The first time this course was taught, students already well-versed in DEI issues felt that the course predominantly addressed White middle class students needs to understand and examine bias, conflict, and inclusion practices. During the second iteration of the course, specific case studies encountered

by professionals in their fields were introduced. Students were asked to work in mixed groups as described above and grapple with complex challenges in situations involving ongoing problems within specific organizations' internal DEI practices, political conflicts of interest for a local organization leader, and a Black Lives Matter/Blue Lives Matter conflict in a local community. These engaged teams appreciated examining relevant, current DEI situations encountered by their near-peers in entry and middle management professional work contexts. The discussions and group work addressing each situation aided students in recognizing their own political, social, educational, and economic biases, privileges, and experiences.

### **Giving people the tools to succeed**

Rawlingson (2017) noted that, "leadership is serving the people that work for you by giving them the tools they need to succeed." Part of training students for professional success is putting them in contact with different references and perspectives. Thanks to a Social Theory Politics and the Arts conference panel presented by Cuyler, Heidelberg, Jung, and Voelker-Morris (2017), SV Flys reworked all her class materials to incorporate multiple perspectives, and scenarios. For example, the use of videos, webinars, and podcasts (such as TED Talks, 99% Invisible, or Code Switch) and readings by diverse authors and speakers replaced "canonized" texts. These modifications proved to be an effective way of engaging all students to explore multiple perspectives and engage in richer conversations. Moreover, more diverse speakers and authors allowed diverse students to more closely identify with and become more familiar with the material and see their voices valued in the issues of the arts management field. In addition, to encourage student's own perspectives and priorities, SV Flys' Arts Management and Managing the Creative Process courses asked students to choose and present on articles from professional peer-reviewed journals and current events related to a selected topic of the course. This activity opened discussions about relevant and current topics and engaged students in the learning process of relating materials to news in which they are interested.

The home department in which Voelker-Morris resides has hosted a "listening session" each year for the past five years. These sessions are opportunities for all students from the department to share their thoughts and experiences that relate to DEI. Special emphasis is on issues and experiences around racial equity. No action outcomes are made during these sessions. They are about listening to student voices and experiences. The most recent listening session included designated breakout groups for BIPOC, international, LGBTQAI++, and allied students. Voelker-Morris included planning for, attending, and feedback about the listening session into her graduate level Professional Development course. Students in the course were invited to help facilitate breakout groups for the listening session if they chose and based on their personal identities. The session was scheduled during the regular professional development course time so that all students in the course participated in the listening session. Course members participated predominantly through listening and note taking. During the class session immediately following the listening session, students developed concrete suggestions and recommendations that built directly from ideas shared during the listening session. Recommendations included improving data tracking, funding, providing progress reports, asking faculty to more readily address navigating current political and social unrest in one's employment position, centering BIPOC and other minoritized groups in examples shared in

courses, and adding an identity-affiliated mentoring program to the degree. The data tracking, reporting, and mentoring recommendations are already gaining traction as next steps for the department. This ongoing feedback loop of engagement in an intentional DEI process in the department helped students see that what they contribute is necessary and meaningful to improving this specific learning community now and for the future. Students were provided with the opportunity to engage with mechanisms (listening session practice; cross-department perspectives) that serve larger successful initiatives around DEI in their current workplace (academia). It is hoped that students understand that each of them and their contributions are important to the outcomes of the department and the course - and therefore, to their future professional roles and responsibilities in the arts and culture sector. This engaged, personalized applied work can help students understand that they contribute to making meaning and improving DEI practices in their current educational setting and for specific students, staff, and faculty they encounter each day.

### **Being the solution to problems**

Arts Administration classes frequently have an important applied or practical component to solve real-world problems. As such, it is important to develop career-ready problem solving skills and empathy (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2021; Rawlingson, 2017) in students which are strongly related to DEI issues. Thus, for all the courses SV Flys teaches, she incorporates an “action-based/DEI activity.” For example, in the Arts Administration course, when creating or analyzing an organization, students respond to the following questions:

- How is the organization mission addressing DEI issues?
- Is the organization’s board and staff representative of the broader community?
- How is the organization guaranteeing equal employment opportunities?
- Is there a diverse representation within their programming and how is it reflective of the community?

Students are asked to write a short statement or letter addressing any neglected DEI practices of a given company.

This analytical address assignment has been included into other courses such as Marketing and Fundraising. Students in these courses are asked to a) create audience development surveys using inclusive language and representation within the questions, b) analyze their promotional/fundraising campaigns, and c) provide results and potential ideas at the end of the course to their real world clients. In the Cultural Policy and Accessibility courses, students must engage in research activities related to a DEI issue and write either a white paper or guidelines for cultural organizations to read. During Fall 2019, students created an accessibility/inclusive guideline for local organizations in Ypsilanti, Michigan to read and consider. This work has now being transformed into a theatrical production accessibility and inclusion handbook that SV Flys is co-writing with some students and professors. This example exemplifies the importance of hosting important DEI conversations in the classroom that then brings students to the reality of the problems in the larger arts and culture sector, inviting them to become agents of change. As

### **Conclusion**

Practicing the types of classroom structures and activities described above has helped our students gain introductory professional habits, knowledge, and skills around inclusive workplace practices. Embedding such practices into core and content courses prepares students to more successfully interact with supervisors and colleagues in internship, board service, volunteer, and employment settings. Students coming out of our programs should be serving the entire community, and working to center community members who have been previously minoritized and underresourced. These pre-professionals can only center and prioritize BIPOC individuals and groups, multiple gender and ability identities, and class conscious staff, creators, performers, volunteers, and audiences if their faculty provide them with course tools, resources, environment, and practices that lead to accessible and inclusive outcomes. Intentionally including this work in our classes has also improved our own practices as faculty. Each of us has become clearer and more direct in speaking with our students about why and how it matters that arts and culture organizations center populations for whom barriers have previously existed. Student and community demographics are changing. We must remove barriers and both attract and retain a diverse population of students in our arts management programs. We must do this to show students ways to remove barriers for and attract and retain a diverse population of audiences, volunteers, funders, and the like for the entire arts, culture, and entertainment sector. SV Flys and Voelker-Morris use classroom practices to ensure we are preparing emerging arts leaders to apply equitable approaches to their professional practices once they enter the field. Like our students, we faculty must be adaptable and inclusive in the course environments and structures we offer, the terminology and case studies we share, and our willingness to critically examine and reflect on our own choices and behaviors in the ways we ask students to be critical and reflective. Such flexibility and modification in our own pedagogical approaches can assist students in implementing new ways of thinking and doing toward inclusivity and equity as leaders in public and civic life. We are preparing future arts and culture managers to act as effective and responsive, accountable and transparent, respectful and proactive leaders in their professional roles and truly reflect and serve communities in which they live, work, and play. As Rawlington (2017) stated so well, "Leadership is the ability to help people achieve things they don't think are possible. Leaders are coaches with a passion for developing people, not players; they get satisfaction from achieving objects through others. Leaders inspire people through a shared vision and create an environment where people feel valued and fulfilled."

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