

DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION ACTION PLAN

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ACTION PLAN

Introduction

The Department of Mass Communication at Towson University is committed to creating a learning and working environment that is nondiscriminatory and inclusive. To this end, following the Black Lives Matter protests in Summer 2020, we expressed our strong support for the ideas the movement stands for and made a public commitment to keep working toward establishing an inclusive environment that is free from racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and cultural biases and other forms of oppression.

We are aware of the socioeconomic differences, racial disparities, and general challenges in the Greater Baltimore area, as well as our responsibility to acknowledge those challenges. Most importantly we recognize our potential role in inspiring and empowering the next generation of socially aware communicators.

To do this, we strive to recruit, retain, and support a diverse group of faculty, staff, and students. During Summer 2020, we researched best practices in diversity, equity, and inclusion; actively participated in industry discussions and workshops on diversity in higher education; and held discussions with our students and alumni.

The result of these efforts is the following action plan. We see this plan as a solution-based approach to a multiyear, collaborative learning process in which we – faculty, staff, and students – create support mechanisms to learn how we can have more meaningful conversations on difficult topics and establish brave spaces for such conversations to take place. We begin with our department’s Statement of Solidarity, which served as the first step of our planning process. A definition of diversity is provided, to serve as the foundation for our planning goals. And finally, a list of action items is identified to encourage and facilitate departmental changes.

STATEMENT OF SOLIDARITY

MCOM Statement and the Path Forward

The Department of Mass Communication (MCOM) strongly supports the COFAC Statement on Solidarity and Purpose. We stand behind the statement's message and believe that embracing its vision is vital to the development and success of our students both as individuals and professionals.

Our Commitment to Our Students, Staff, and Faculty

The department believes that all students have a right to work and learn in an atmosphere free from racial, ethnic, religious, gender, and cultural biases and other forms of oppression. We are committed to developing course content, course delivery, and interactive experiences that include diverse voices, especially those that have traditionally been marginalized.

Our Role in Creating an Inclusive Environment

We believe that MCOM faculty, staff, and students should be taught to identify and acknowledge their own racial blind spots so that we may all learn to challenge those prejudices that may appear in our professional and academic work. We aim to inspire and empower our students to be socially aware and active leaders in their fields; to call out injustices when they see them; and to set the standards of ethical communication and reporting practices. To do this, they must develop the media literacy skills needed to identify overt and subtle racial biases that appear in advertising, news reports, and public relations strategies. It is our goal, as educators, to provide the resources and experiences necessary to foster this learning environment and make this kind of systemic change possible.

Our Next Steps

We acknowledge that achieving these goals depends on our ability to include as many perspectives as possible, including those of our Black students, Indigenous students, and Students of Color. As such, the department is developing an action plan to strengthen the diversity of its curriculum, programming, and voices. The full implementation of a meaningful plan will take time, but we recognize there are steps we can take to begin this process immediately. We have put together an ad-hoc working group that will identify and prioritize action areas to make our department more inclusive. Part of this plan involves working with current MCOM students and alumni to ensure that students' voices are represented. And through all of this, we hope to be mindful learners, listening to and valuing the experiences of our students so that we can continue to make meaningful changes to our curriculum and programming.

We are committed to extensive and ongoing learning about how we can do better for our BIPOC students. We stand with you, will stand up for you, and will do our best to make meaningful space for you.

ACTION ITEMS

Defining Diversity

As a first step in this process, we believe diversity needs to be defined broadly within the context of higher education. When we say diversity[1], we include an individual's:

- Personhood and character
- Internal identities (such as racial identity, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, physical and/or mental abilities, and ethnic identity)
- External identities (such as religion, education, socioeconomic class background, work experience, marital and parental status, appearance, geographic location, hobbies)
- Organizational identities (such as management status, classification, field of study, seniority/rank, union affiliation)
- Socioeconomic status (such as social background, income, living situation, internet access)

Action Items

Our guiding objective is to create an inclusive working and learning environment for all members of our community. These action items are designed to highlight areas where students, staff, and faculty can strengthen their ongoing work and continue to grow collaboratively. This plan is a community initiative and is designed to support members of our community – our faculty, staff, and students – in their attempts to create an inclusive environment. Acknowledging and supporting similar initiatives at the college and university levels, as a department we will act on the following seven items:

Action Item 1: Listen and Learn We know our journey of understanding and learning is never complete. We will continuously solicit feedback from our students, staff, and faculty and learn from their experiences. To do this we will:

- **Priority Item:** Establish a standing committee on Diversity & Inclusion composed of students, staff, and faculty members to actively listen to, learn from and address current experiences.
- Employ the standing committee to create detailed implementation plans for items included in the action plan.
- Update the MCOM student exit survey to include questions exploring diversity and inclusion issues.
- Create anonymous feedback mechanisms for students, staff, and faculty to voice comments and concerns about department practices.
- Establish a partnership with the Office of Inclusion & Institutional Equity (OIIE) to create an Ombudsman mechanism that exists outside departmental structures.
- Include diversity and inclusion questions in existing feedback mechanisms, when possible.

Action Item 2: Inclusive Representation We know inclusion cannot be achieved unless diverse representation is observed across the department's interests. To do this we will:

- **Priority Item:** Ensure the diversity of our students is represented in marketing and other outward-facing documents.
- Strive to make sure the diversity of the student body is reflected among faculty and staff ranks.
- Ensure our faculty is diverse in terms of subject expertise, helping students get exposed to various worldviews and professional experiences.
- Solicit student feedback about decisions that impact student experience.

Action Item 3: Inclusive Curriculum Faculty will diversify various aspects of their course structures and teaching to ensure inclusive learning experiences. To do this we will:

- **Priority Item:** Develop class material and lecture delivery methods that take accessibility into consideration.
- Emphasize readings, guest speakers, and other course material that reflect the diversity of our student body and the industries represented in this department.
- Discuss the role of mass communication practices in overall socio-economic structures.
- Encourage faculty to expose students to diverse job functions, industries, and media outlets in their teaching.
- Create opportunities for students to engage in experiential and service-learning projects proposing solutions to problems we face in our region.
- Learn from the inclusive curriculum practices of other departments on campus.

Action Item 4: Inclusive Classroom Environment We will work toward ensuring all students feel a sense of belonging in their classes and feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics. To do this we will:

- **Priority Item:** Establish and implement faculty training programs in partnership with OIIE.
- Support faculty development through trainings on facilitating conversations about sensitive topics.
- Introduce anti-racist pedagogy to classroom discussions.
- Establish standing training and guidelines designed to acknowledge and identify microaggressions.
- Include language on combating microaggressions on course syllabi.

Action Item 5: Inclusive Conversations We will work toward creating an inclusive environment outside the classroom and open spaces for having difficult conversations. To do this we will:

- **Priority Item:** Empower student organizations within our department to lead these conversations through the standing committee on diversity and inclusion.
- Acknowledge the need to have spaces for conversation, and partner with OIIE for more training on how to have difficult conversations.
- Offer opportunities for ongoing feedback about student experiences.
- Highlight the importance of faculty-student conversations to understand student experiences.

Action Item 6: Inclusive Programming We will establish policies and procedures to have more inclusive events in our departments. To do this we will:

- **Priority Item:** Ensure all events organized by the department will take accessibility into consideration during planning.
- Encourage collaboration between students, staff, and faculty to organize department-wide events.
- Disseminate guidelines for acknowledging and identifying microaggressions among faculty, staff, and students.

Action Item 7: Assess and Maintain We will assess our progress and work on our shortcomings. To do this we will:

- **Priority Item:** Review the plan each spring semester to track progress toward stated action items and establish areas of strength and opportunities for improvement to be addressed during the following academic year.
- Use and refer to this plan as a guide when making departmental decisions.
- Revisit this plan at the annual Fall Department Retreat to remind faculty and staff of the department's commitment to diversity.
- Solicit continuous feedback from all stakeholders on our progress through surveys, individual conversations, focus groups, and other initiatives overseen by the Diversity & Inclusion Committee.