

Creating and Working Well with Diverse Committees

Given the diversity of our institution and UVic's institutional mandate to be equitable and inclusive, diversity is a reality in all our work. Diverse perspectives are needed to gain comprehensive understanding and expand thinking, challenging perspectives and enabling more creative and targeted solutions. The following ideas may help in the formation and working stages of university committees.

The importance of diversity to committee work

- **Diversity is a reality in all our work.** Because there are always many ways in which a particular topic can be viewed, diverse perspectives are needed to gain comprehensive understanding.
- **Importance of less common perspectives.** While each person's perspective adds value to a committee, less common perspectives can provide more points from which to view a topic, thus expanding the thinking of a committee and enabling more creative and targeted solutions.

Selecting for diversity

- **Complex link between social location and knowledge.** Someone's social location and their areas of knowledge, skill and interest represent two separate ways people can contribute knowledge and perspective. Their areas of expertise and interest may or may not intersect with their perceived identity. Sometimes a researcher from a privileged social location has a good understanding of the experiences and perspectives of a marginalized group, gained from personal experience and professional work; their insights are useful for a committee. This knowledge, however, isn't the same as knowledge that comes from lived experience. The latter is invaluable and can't be replaced by theoretical or even experiential knowledge by someone from a different background.
- **Avoiding tokenism.** Developing meaningful professional relationships that allow you to know the perspectives, professional expertise and interests of many colleagues is ground work for inviting committee participation. Knowledge about these topics enables you to invite participants with both diversity knowledge and identity-linked perspectives that relate to the goals of the committee, rather than just their identity. Such invitations, grounded in respect for both professional knowledge and life experience, are less likely to be felt as token representation.
- **What diversity is needed?** People come from diverse and intersecting social locations, all of which provide valuable insight for problem solving. Representation from these perspectives (depending on the issue) is important among committee membership or through another method of consultation:
 - Gender
 - Indigeneity
 - Ethnicity/ "race"
 - Age
 - Power and position (social/ administrative/ economic/ other)
 - Disability
 - Sexuality
- **Review scope of work to broaden potential participants.** In identifying who might be selected for a committee, consider what activities and people will be affected by its work. The opportunity may arise to include people from beyond the scope initially identified.
- **Remember the rule of >1.** In order for non-majority opinions to be heard, a committee needs more than one person in a group representing an alternate point of view. This means that committees

need to contain multiple persons representing multiple forms of diversity to be effectively “diverse.” When this is not possible, additional attention to soliciting and seriously considering and integrating marginalized views, including consulting resources and experts from outside the committee, is important to ensure that existing diversity can affect a committee’s work.

- **Add knowledge about diversity.** Committees benefit from consciously building their capacity for recognizing, understanding and responding to the experiences of diversity and discrimination. This can be through individual learning; group education for the committee; or including someone with expertise as an advisor. A combination of approaches can yield the best results and pull a committee together with a common understanding of the issues.
- **Value diversity through full participation.** Except if a committee member is unable to give their full time to a committee and wishes to act in a purely advisory role, it is understood that all committee members should be included from the start of the committee so that they can contribute to the formation of the goals and focus of the work. It is also understood that, barring an individual’s limited time to devote to the work of the committee, all members will be full voting members. This includes persons who are brought on as “equity” representatives: such persons should be engaged from the start of the committee work, with voting rights. This is particularly relevant for search committees.

Scheduling

- **Scheduling: differential impact.** The timing of meetings can make participation difficult. While work constraints (class schedules, standing meetings) tend to affect all participants equally, responsibilities outside the university (childcare, eldercare, medical appointments, cultural/community responsibilities) are differentially distributed, with some people facing heavy additional time obligations that correlate with an already marginalized identity. Often these responsibilities fall outside of regular working hours.
- **Optimal scheduling for sustainable committee work.** Scheduling at non-standard times can create additional hardship or barriers for some faculty members. Holding many meetings outside of standard work hours also can create a challenge for all faculty members to sustain work-life balance and wellness. To create more sustainable scheduling and maximize participation, consider a few approaches:
 - As a standard practice, avoid scheduling for early in the morning, late in the afternoon, outside of a standard business day, or evenings and weekends. Such a policy can improve accessibility for all.
 - When it is not possible to find times to meet within these parameters, explore if any standard commitments can be shifted to create space for individuals and groups as a whole within the working day.
 - Be aware of whose participation will be compromised by the various meeting times proposed. If meeting times that works for the majority of participants regularly exclude participation by minority group members, perhaps alternating meeting times might allow all members to participate.
 - When it is not possible, explore what alternate supports can help facilitate participation (e.g., bringing in meals, childcare on site) and what other ways there might be to participate (e.g., video or phone participation; sharing work online; occasionally holding two smaller meetings with different sub-sets of the committee).

Support for marginalized participants

- **Make access possible.** Check individually with committee members about participation-related needs and any access barriers you may need to address.
- **Fairness.** Explore what supports might be appropriate for participants who carry marginalized perspectives; whose time is under demand by multiple committees; and/or whose positions and participation in committee work are not considered part of their role in the same way as full-time regular faculty. Forms of support can include workload adjustments; teaching or marking support, being relieved of service responsibilities within the unit because of service outside the unit; or a course release in acknowledgement of particularly heavy administrative responsibilities.
- **Address the multiple demands on marginalized persons.** Participation takes time and energy, both physical and emotional. While inviting diverse representatives is important, remember that in a context where there is a large majority population, those who have less common identities will frequently be on call to participate in this work. To reduce the load on members of marginalized groups, some options include:
 - If you identify as a member of the majority in relation to a form of identity (e.g., a settler; heterosexual; etc.) take responsibility to learn independently about the experiences, perspectives and contributions from non-dominant perspectives (ideally through reading and experience rather than through personal conversations which also require time and energy) and to champion those points of view. Doing this self-education is respectful and enlightening, and part of our shared responsibility to advance an equitable and inclusive institution.
 - Consider when marginalized views are most needed (e.g., at formative stages; review points) so that individuals can be called on at key moments rather than all the time.
 - Consider alternate ways to gather input (e.g., private meetings; phone calls; guest presentations) which can free people for other work.
 - Consult with the overall responsible authority on balancing work responsibilities to clarify who might have time available, who not, etc.
 - At the same time, offer the opportunity: don't make the decision for someone on whether they should/ should not participate. They may feel that a particular project is worth their time, and it is ultimately up to them. If they then become members of a committee, they should be full members with all the voting and participation rights of the other members.
- **Minimize risk associated with participation.** Participation involves risk. Those with less power may have more to offer from an alternate viewpoint, and may also face repercussions for not agreeing with a majority perspective. Thus, attending to group dynamics and processes and creating a safe space for contribution is important (see next section).

Doing the work

- **Value alternate views.** That a view is challenging does not make it wrong: soliciting and valuing diverse viewpoints can make committee work enjoyable and more effective.
- **Manage group dynamics.** The dynamics of the group matter. Set up participation processes that value wide-ranging ideas; that do not rush to consensus; that hear different views, and where they come from, to gain understanding; that allow breadth of consideration while keeping a focus on a goal. Some elements include
 - **Agenda.** Have a clear agenda, available in advance, with opportunities for people to add to it.

- **Ground rules.** Set/negotiate ground rules for participation. Include elements related to listening, considering/seeking alternate viewpoints, setting aside personal agendas, etc.
- **Revisit goals.** Regularly revisit the goals of the committee.
- **Discuss bias.** Discuss bias: its universality; how it reduces our ability to hear and learn from new-to-us perspectives; ways to counteract it.
- **Facilitate interpersonal connection.** Create and encourage opportunities for committee members to mingle and connect rather than simply around a table and agenda.
- **Use voting where appropriate to facilitate unpressured decision-making.** Consensus is not always possible. Voting by secret ballot can allow participants to influence the direction of a group without needing to publicly challenge prevailing opinion or strong views.
- **Consider/ integrate diverse perspectives.** When making decisions or recommendations, reflect back on the diversity of perspectives brought forward during the process and ensure they have been appropriately considered in reaching the decisions/recommendations.

What you can do to enhance your equity contribution to a committee

We all have a role to play in enhancing the equity functioning of a committee. Here are some ideas for individual consideration. Recognizing that we all have complex identities and social locations, and are engaged in wide ranging committees and topics, some of these may speak to you more than others as ways to enhance your contributions.

- **Learn about bias and discrimination.** There is a wealth of research on the ways that bias and discrimination impact individuals and groups, and sideline the contributions of diverse persons. Make time to do some reading in this area.
- **Learn about diversity and diverse experiences.** Do your own research on the equity dimensions of the subject under exploration, starting with individual reading and research.
- **Listen.** Particularly if you often speak a lot in meetings, take time to hear out different perspectives being offered and reflect on them before commenting.
- **Suspend disbelief.** Marginalized viewpoints can often be hard to hear or understand for people who have not been exposed to particular perspectives before. They often are not taken at face value, but are justified and explained away. Avoid doing this. If you don't understand, ask questions in order to understand rather than to pick apart a perspective.
- **Value alternate views.** Take it as a personal challenge to understand better where the different perspectives on the committee are coming from. Such an exercise is bound to expand your understanding of the issues under discussion.

We are glad to consult with you about equity and committee work, from the composition of committees through equity practices to enhance effective work and outcomes. Please connect with us.