



Spring 2021 Newsletter

## **Rowan Profs Engaging in Advocacy and Praxis**

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It was two years ago when borough police stopped a vehicle occupied by two Black males who were both Rowan University students. The students were ordered from the vehicle at gunpoint, searched, forced to kneel, and then handcuffed. The young men were physically unharmed and let go in what turned out to be a case of mistaken identity. However, time will determine the emotional trauma of being male and Black in the face of white police holding guns. Students and the community posted video and comments about this incident on social media, and there was a palpable sense of urgency to address it across the campus. Silence in such a time felt as volatile as anti-Black aggression, as the campus community connected this event to other incidents of abusive policing down the road in Camden, across the bridge in Philadelphia, and around the nation.

In response, faculty members from Rowan's College of Education Diversity Committee began to organize. They began by drafting a statement to the campus community:

As a College of Education Diversity Committee, we believe the University needs to ensure that:

- Blackness is not linked with criminality, but rather understood and treated as a vital part of the university community.
- The voices of affected students are centered in this process of valuing differences on campus.
- Law enforcement – both university police and the county police department – are actively participating in ongoing race bias awareness training and reviewing existing protocol.
- As a College of Education committed to social justice, we actively incorporate these discussions in classrooms, learning spaces, and communities, as we work toward access, success, and equity.

The statement was crafted and approved speedily by the Diversity Committee, but getting it filtered and approved by the college administration proved more complicated. Regrettably, the Diversity Committee's words were never disseminated within the university community. This troubling moment of voicelessness galvanized a commitment to action.

During this time as well, the College of Education was ignited by a dean with a fervent commitment to social justice; our work was framed by the tag line *Access, Success, and Equity...Turning Research into Practice*. As we considered these commitments, several questions emerged: *What is the efficacy of our curricular and field experiences in preparing*

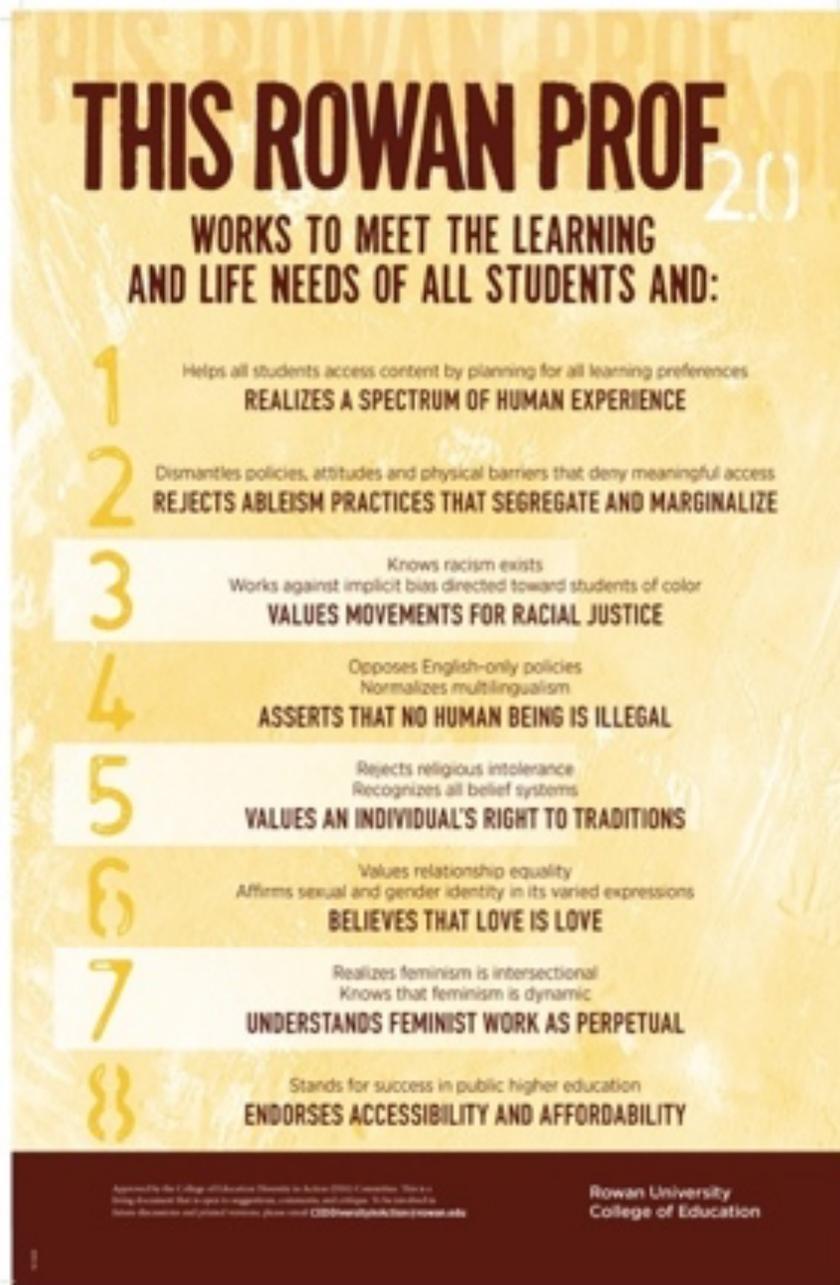
*teachers to embrace and effectively support p-12 student diversity? How are we looking closely at our students at program entry and exit?*

Guided by the college mission to ensure that candidates develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to foster academic achievement, social responsibility, personal responsibility, and social justice so that they can, in turn, facilitate high achievement in P-16 learners, the Diversity Committee adapted the Multicultural Teaching Competency Scale (MTCS) (Spanierman et al., 2010) to assess student knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to diversity at admission and completion of all programs. We also surveyed the faculty on perceptions of cultural inclusion, collegial trust around expressing opinions, decision making processes, and support for teaching, research, and service. The committee implemented book clubs on culturally sustaining pedagogy and a Kaleidoscope Connections blog for posting current research articles related to issues of equity and social justice. We established the Students for Diversity and Social Equity Club and a hiring resource for circulating faculty searches to more diverse outlets. The work devoted to issues of diversity was finding deeper meaning beyond an early emphasis framed primarily by accreditation guidelines.

Strengthened by a new university division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), headed by our former dean, Diversity in Action (DIA) emerged as a dynamic, action-oriented committee focused on social justice and equity within the College of Education and the larger community and replaced the former Diversity Committee. Collectively, the committee represents faculty from departments across the college and draws on years of experience and commitment to social justice work. This work spans international contexts with research in countries such as Guatemala, Honduras, and Spain. Faculty are equally engaged in work that supports English language learners, students, and faculty in urban settings and includes allyship with LGBTQ+ populations and addressing issues related to text book affordability and food insecurities.

Believing that the existence of racial unrest across the nation and the impact of a global pandemic are unavoidable topics in the university classroom, DIA has most recently established monthly college wide events called Coffee, Critical Conversations, and Community. Faculty have facilitated conversations on topics such as immigration, wellness, inclusion, and antiracist pedagogy. DIA has also surveyed faculty on what they would like to discuss in EDU-CHATs focused on Social Justice Growth in the Time of COVID-19/Online Learning. Led by a new dean as equally devoted to this work as the previous one, DIA is moving forward in efforts to support the college vision to “be a leading force in preparing and supporting reflective practitioners who use education to transform our global society.”

Our current dean has provided DIA with space in our building where we can provide resources to students and faculty. The most recent statement DIA crafted expressed solidarity with Asian/Asian American and Pacific Islander students, faculty, and staff in recognition of the tragic deaths of eight people, including six women of Asian descent who were murdered in Atlanta. The statement was disseminated to the college without delay—a welcome indication of progress. DIA is now initiating an online presence where students can have conversations on topics such as race and policing in response to crises such as the recent murder of Daunte Wright at the hands of police that took place several miles south of where Derek Chauvin is on trial for the murder of George Floyd. The university division of DEI is launching a Law Enforcement and Community Collaborative effort focused on professional development that includes a certificate program and enhancing what happens at the Police Academy. The hope is that DIA members will be invited to have a voice in this DEI work and looking ahead, DIA will continue to advocate for equitable educational change and praxis to promote social justice.



Poster representing who we aspire to be as educators.