Utilizing a Classroom Intervention to Address Campus Climate Goals

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Summary:

Many campus community members have proposed large, time-intensive programs to improve UW-Madison's campus climate. However, psychological research has shown that seemingly small manipulations can produce impressive changes in relevant outcomes. Our idea is one such short, empirically based intervention, the key element of which involves adding a "Diversity Page" to a course's syllabus. We will evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention in a randomized controlled trial, examining whether the intervention improves sense of belonging, perceived climate, and attitudes toward other social groups among both students who do and those who do not belong to underrepresented groups. The intervention has a proven impact (each of its elements have been shown to improve climate in previous empirical studies), is easily scalable to all classes taught at UW, is extremely easy to implement, and does not cost anything.

Background:

Many of the promising ideas we have heard about improving campus climate have one common assumption: that these efforts must be in-depth and very thorough in order to be effective, requiring large time and resource commitments. However, research has shown that even relatively simple and straightforward interventions can have immense effects on people's behaviors and beliefs.[1] For example, a simple manipulation whereby survey questions were written using noun phrasing instead of verb phrasing (e.g., "being a voter" vs. "voting") led to an 11% increase in voter turnout.[2] More closely relevant to the proposed research, another study demonstrated that first-year African American students who were taught that all students worry at first about their belonging in college, but grow to feel at home over time, had higher grades over the next three years, halving the achievement gap.[3] These interventions are effective because they are based on precise, well-founded theories in the behavioral sciences, and demonstrate long-term effects because they affect students' enduring way of thinking rather than making something salient at a single moment in time.

The Proposed Idea – A Diversity Page:

The proposed intervention will involve asking instructors to attach a "Diversity Page" to the end of their syllabi. We chose the academic realm as a setting for the intervention because of its relative underutilization in current campus climate efforts and the known influence of leaders like faculty members in shaping institutional culture.[4] Instructors will read this Diversity Page with the students on the first day of class when they go through the syllabus. In addition, they

will talk briefly about the Diversity Page, discussing a few key points that we will provide. The page will bring across four important messages. Each message is based on relevant theory in the behavioral and social sciences, and has been shown to improve climate and/or intergroup relations in previous empirical research. The four messages are:

1. *Diversity statement*. Students are informed that UW-Madison, its chancellor, and the instructor of the course are deeply committed to diversity and inclusiveness. Research has shown that reminding people of the prevalent norm in an organization and having leaders endorse that norm plays an important role in shaping their attitudes and behaviors.[5] African American employees feel safer in institutions that have a diversity statement on their webpage.[6]

2. *Career relevance of cultural competence*. Students are reminded of the fact that cultural competence–one's capacity to effectively interact and work in a team with members from different social groups–is a key factor both for getting a job and moving up the career ladder.[7] Numerous studies have demonstrated that students put more effort into learning a skill if they think it will be useful for them in the future and is relevant to their identity.[8] By framing cultural competence as a skill that can be learned through practice and making it personally relevant, students will feel intrinsically motivated to behave in an inclusive way.

3. *Peer reference*. Students are informed of recent research on campus showing that the vast majority of UW students endorse diversity, enjoy having many social groups represented on campus, and try to behave in an inclusive manner. These studies also show that the majority of students do not discriminate against others based on their membership in a particular social group. Although acts of bigotry occur on campus, these acts are committed by a small minority of individuals whose attitudes and personalities differ radically from those of the average UW student. Empirical research has shown that this type of "social norms messaging"–informing people about their peers' behaviors–is highly effective in influencing human behavior.[9]

4. *Identifying key behaviors.* Students will be given a list of behaviors they should try to perform or avoid–a list of "dos" and "don'ts." The behaviors in the list include some identified in interviews with students from underrepresented groups on campus and some effective techniques from the psychological literature, such as choosing a diverse group for class projects.[10] Concrete instructions like these are useful in situations where people simply do not know exactly what to do; even if students care about diversity, they might not know how to act upon this value.

The Diversity Page will combine these messages into one single page that will require mere minutes for a professor to present. In addition, we will provide instructors with a few additional arguments that they can use when commenting on the Diversity Page.

Evaluating Effectiveness:

Although the individual messages have been shown to be effective in previous research, we nevertheless suggest evaluating our intervention in a randomized controlled trial involving 40 courses here at UW (to be conducted in Fall 2016). We will randomly assign courses to experimental conditions such that 20 instructors will include our Diversity Page in the syllabus, while the remaining 20 instructors will not. Outcome measures will be collected in November

2017. We will use an outcomes survey that has been used in previous studies by our lab in UW-Madison classrooms. The survey has been pilot tested and contains a variety of psychological measures related to campus climate (e.g., perceived discrimination, sense of belonging, feelings toward different social groups, engagement with diversity, cross-group friendships). The survey can be completed in 5-10 minutes. We will also obtain students' grades. We predict that students exposed to our Diversity Page will value and engage with diversity more, show greater warmth toward students with different social identities, and express improved expectations about interacting with peers who are different from them. We expect additional positive effects for students from underrepresented groups in forms of an increased sense of belonging and better grades.

Advantages of this Proposal:

A big strength of our approach is its efficiency; rather than requiring many training sessions and taking away valuable class time, the proposed intervention is straightforward and very easy to implement. The four messages used in the intervention have been shown to improve climate in previous empirical studies. In addition, we will be using an experimental procedure and outcome measures that have been used in similar studies here on campus. If the Diversity Page proves to be effective, it is easily scalable: the chancellor could simply ask all instructors at UW to include our Diversity Page in their syllabi.

With implementation campus-wide, students will hear these messages in multiple courses during their college experience; this consistent reminder, combined with the demonstrated long-term effects of these kinds of interventions, will lead to abiding impact despite taking only a few minutes of the students' time. Furthermore, our approach has benefits for instructors as well, giving them tools to interact more meaningfully with diversity, expanding their own awareness and knowledge about topics surrounding diversity, and improving engagement and achievement in their classrooms.

The proposed plan has very small costs (related to testing its effectiveness) and potentially tremendous benefits: students from underrepresented groups will have an improved sense of belongingness and better academic performance, other students will engage more with diversity and become more culturally competent, instructors will become more aware of diversity-related issues, and campus climate and inclusivity will be improved for all members of the campus community.

Capability:

████████████████████████████, I have developed the statistical skills and theoretical knowledge necessary to complete the development, implementation, and assessment of this project. Working with Professor Markus Brauer, assessing the effectiveness of interventions seeking to improve attitudes and behaviors related to diversity and inclusiveness is no foreign concept, but rather one of the core aims of the lab.

Implementation plan:

 Phase One (May-August 2016) - Contacting instructors: Over the summer, we will contact instructors from the UW-Madison community, and of those who show interest, 40 will be selected to take part in our randomized controlled trial in the fall semester. We will meet with instructors individually to explain the Diversity Page to them. We will obtain IRB consent in order to collect data that will demonstrate the effectiveness of the Diversity Page.

 Phase Two (September-December 2016) - Collecting outcome measures: Near the end of the first semester, the outcome survey will be administered, and data will be collected. Administration of this survey has been done either in-person or online by our lab in the past, and students will be rewarded extra credit for filling out the survey. We will ask instructors a few open-ended questions in order to understand how easy the intervention was to implement, whether they thought it was effective, and whether they would use it again, among other questions. We will analyze data in December 2016 and January 2017.

 Phase Three (January-May 2017)- Developing final program and large-scale implementation: The combination of quantitative and qualitative data collected in the first semester will be used to develop a final intervention that will be distributed to all faculty. This final intervention will include all components of the initial intervention considered to be effective while maintaining its easy-to-implement qualities. This will dramatically increase the likelihood instructors will use the final intervention consistently in their classrooms. We will reach out to departments and offer a brief training in the intervention.

Budget and Resources
Phase One: Summer 2016
- **$2,007**: One 25% summer graduate assistantship for intervention development, IRB approval, and faculty training (10hrs per week of work)
- **$200**: printing "Diversity Page" and other materials

Phases Two and Three: Academic Year, 2016-2017
- **$9,033**: One 25% graduate assistantship for data collection, faculty interviews, data analysis, final intervention dispersal and implementation

Total budget: **$11,240**

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