
Diverse Communities (“J”) Courses: A Handbook to Guide Proposals

Curriculum & Academic Policies Council (CAPC), West Chester University

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I) Steps for proposing a Diverse Communities course

Overview

Any faculty member at WCU may submit a proposal for a course to receive the General Education program's Diverse Communities ("J") designation. Faculty can adapt an existing course or develop an entirely new one; either approach is welcome, so long as the given course directly engages the values and requirements of the Diverse Communities designation.

Before submitting a proposal, faculty should understand the rationale and perspective behind Diverse Communities courses. The "J" designation stands for "justice" and denotes a social justice approach to diversity. Rather than simply acquainting students with differences among diverse communities, J courses seek to help students understand the structural inequality and oppression that shape the status of peoples from diverse communities, as well as the lived experiences and varied modes of resistance that these communities use to challenge that oppression. Ideally, J courses also make students aware of the potential actions that they themselves might take to confront these injustices.

As the university's General Education policy indicates, Diverse Communities courses "focus on historically marginalized groups (based on gender, race, class, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexuality, and other forms of difference) and are framed by theories that lend understanding to the analysis of structural inequalities." They also "invite students to consider how marginalized groups resist oppression and have agency in spite of structural exclusion and discrimination." The larger aims of J courses are to "foster an informed and reasoned openness to, and understanding of, difference" and to help the university achieve its goal of "graduating students who are committed to creating a just and equitable society."

Parts of the Proposal

A complete proposal for a Diverse Communities course consists of four separate parts: **1) Narrative; 2) Syllabus; 3) Bibliography; and 4) CIM Application.** Each of these four parts is explained in detail below. Please also note that when preparing the narrative and syllabus, proposers are strongly encouraged to consult the Diverse Communities Course Criteria checklist, available here: <https://www.wcupa.edu/viceProvost/capc/genEd.aspx>

For the sake of convenience, the contents of that checklist are provided and explained below.

1) Narrative

The main purpose of your proposal narrative is to explain how and why your course qualifies as a Diverse Communities offering. To accomplish this goal, the narrative should first explain your approach to teaching students how structural inequality and oppression—*in the specific subject area of your course*—are established and maintained by groups with power and privilege so as to marginalize the peoples (and their concepts and practices) that your course focuses on. This explanation might include a discussion of how a particular concept (e.g., "whiteness"; "heterosexuality"; etc.) achieves status as the accepted, normalized, and even celebrated standard (one often backed by white supremacy and heterosexism), thereby marginalizing and oppressing others who resist this standard. Your explanation should also emphasize the mechanisms and systems used by the dominant group to maintain and exploit that

concept's privileged status so that those who adhere to other concepts and practices are subordinated and prevented from attaining power.

At the same time—and equally importantly—your narrative must also make clear, from the perspective of peoples from marginalized communities, how they negotiate and contest the status and meaning of the concepts and oppressive practices of dominant communities so as to resist or even eliminate them. What are the varied and divergent modes and practices of resistance and negotiation adopted by peoples who are marginalized to confront the prevailing concepts/practices that are determined by those with power and privilege? In what ways might those modes of resistance sometimes contradict one other?

Focusing on “how” this dynamic process takes place requires a strong theoretical framework that clearly specifies the nature and workings of relations between peoples, power, and structures; this framework might also consider how these dynamics can be (among others) historical, institutional, cultural, and psychological.

Keep in mind that your narrative should not take the form of a mere catalog of “differences” in practices and/or concepts. Listing differences is effective only in so far as it works to provide evidence of the existence, operations, and pervasiveness of structural inequalities or to illustrate the agency and forms of resistance carried out by peoples in oppressed communities.

Narrative section of the checklist

In an effort to provide clarity to preparers, we list the Narrative section of the Diverse Communities Course Criteria checklist below. As the checklist indicates, your narrative should explain all of the following:

- which historically marginalized groups (based on categories including, e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, gender expression, sexuality, class, religion, language, national origin, immigrant status, age, body size, ability, etc.) are substantively studied in the course
- how the course considers the multiple ways in which these marginalized groups resist oppression and have agency despite structural exclusion and discrimination. (For this item, it would be ideal if your narrative could explain, from the perspective of peoples from marginalized communities, the varied modes and practices of resistance and negotiation adopted by the marginalized to confront the prevailing concepts/practices that are determined by those with power and privilege in the dominant culture.)
- what recognized theoretical approach(es) or framework(s) the course uses and how they enable the course to provide an analysis of structural inequalities
- how the course fosters an informed and reasoned openness to, and understanding of, difference
- how the course furthers the university's goal of graduating students who are committed to creating a just and equitable society. (For this item, it would be ideal if the narrative could give an example of how the course actually achieves this broader aim.)

2) Syllabus

Like any syllabus submitted to CAPC, your Diverse Communities syllabus should provide a detailed explanation of the course, its goals, its student learning outcomes, and the activities and assignments that provide instruction and assessment of those outcomes. The syllabus should also meet all of the criteria established by university policy (the Provost emails these criteria to faculty before each semester). Most important of all, your syllabus should adhere to all of the requirements listed in the Syllabus section of CAPC's Diverse Communities Course Criteria checklist. For the sake of clarity, we list these requirements below.

Please also note that while there will unavoidably be overlap between the narrative and the syllabus, each document should stand on its own (i.e., preparers should not submit a narrative that simply says "see syllabus").

Syllabus section of the checklist

Your Diverse Communities course syllabus should do all of the following:

- Include a clear and prominent statement early in the syllabus that the course is an approved General Education course that meets the Gen Ed curriculum's Diverse Communities ("J") requirement.
- State that as a Diverse Communities course, the course is designed to help students meet General Education goals #1 ("Communicate effectively"), #2 (Think critically and analytically"), and #5 ("Respond thoughtfully to diversity").
- Explicitly link Gen Ed goals with their instruction and assessment: i.e., the syllabus must spell out which course activities (e.g., exams, papers, presentations, etc.) provide instruction and assessment of the specific Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) that are tied to Gen Ed goals 1, 2, and 5, as noted in the Gen Ed program description here: https://www.wcupa.edu/viceProvost/capc/documents/GenEdProgram2019_Feb2019.pdf
- For Gen Ed goal #5, this means naming the two goal #5 SLOs—(a) "Discuss the historical practices leading to the marginalization of diverse groups"; and (b) "Identify and analyze structural inequalities using a recognized theoretical approach"—and explaining how course activities provide instruction and assessment of those SLOs. For the sake of clarity, the syllabus should explicitly link course activities to SLOs separately for each individual SLO. (The syllabus should also provide instruction-and-assessment information for course-specific learning outcomes and, if the proposed J course is required for a particular program, provide such information for program-specific goals as well.)
- Identify which historically marginalized groups (based on categories including, e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, gender expression, sexuality, class, religion, language, national origin, immigrant status, age, body size, ability, etc.) are studied in the course. The syllabus must make clear that the study of these groups is substantive in nature.
- Identify one or more recognized theoretical approach(es) or framework(s) on which the

course is based. It must be clear that the course's theoretical framework provides an analysis of structural inequalities.

- Make clear how the course considers the multiple ways in which peoples from the studied groups resist oppression and achieve agency despite structural exclusion and discrimination.
- Include a statement indicating how the course might foster an informed and reasoned openness to, and understanding of, difference. (This statement can be placed anywhere in the syllabus; many instructors prefer to add it to their course description. Because the statement is not officially part of the Gen Ed goal #5 learning outcomes, it shouldn't be listed with the SLOs, but it can be placed below them if you wish.)
- Include a statement indicating how the course might further the university's goal of graduating students who are committed to creating a just and equitable society. (Like the above statement on "informed and reasoned openness," this statement can be placed anywhere in the syllabus; many instructors add it to their course description. Because the statement is not officially part of the Gen Ed goal #5 learning outcomes, it shouldn't be listed with the SLOs, but it can be placed below them if you wish.)
- Include a bibliography of major works in the field that inform the approaches and perspectives used in the course.
- The course organization, student learning outcomes, list of required readings, course schedule/calendar, and assignments should all directly reflect the approaches and goals detailed in the course narrative and required by the Diverse Communities designation. (Ideally, the course schedule/calendar will show how the course's theoretical framework informs the class work, be it via readings, units, topics, or other signs that the theoretical approach is meaningfully integrated into the course. Similarly, assignment descriptions in the syllabus will, ideally, indicate how the assignments embody or put into practice the theories of oppression central to the course.)

3) Bibliography

The bibliography should list major works in the field that identify the approach(es) used in the course; texts that engage with issues of social justice and challenges to systems of oppression are especially relevant. The bibliography may also include other works that inform your ideas or pedagogy. The list of sources does not need to be annotated.

4) CIM Application

In addition to the above three parts, a complete J-course proposal must (like any CAPC proposal) be submitted to CIM, WCU's web-based course inventory management system.

Before the CIM process begins, you should submit your narrative, syllabus, and bibliography to any relevant department or program committees for approval. Once this process is complete, you should then submit these materials to CIM. As part of the CIM process, you will be required to upload your materials and fill out a web-based application form and check appropriate boxes, including the box for "full CAPC review."

Under “Purpose of Course,” be prepared to provide brief answers to the questions, “What are the proposed changes?” and “Why are the changes being proposed?” In this same section, check “Additional Baccalaureate Requirement 2019,” which will trigger a box allowing you to define the purpose of the course as “Diversity Requirement 2019.” Clicking on this box will open another box that shows the relevant Gen Ed Goals and learning outcomes for J courses.

Here you should make sure that the three required Gen Ed Goals for J courses—Goal #1: Communicate Effectively, Goal #2: Think Critically and Analytically, and Goal #5: Respond Thoughtfully to Diversity—are checked. For Goals #1 and #2, keep checked the SLOs that your course meets, and uncheck any others, keeping in mind that your course need address only *one* of the four SLOs listed under Goal #1 and *one* of the four SLOs under Goal #2.

However, for Goal #5 (“Respond thoughtfully to diversity”), make sure that *both* boxes are checked: (a) “Discuss the historical practices leading to the marginalization of diverse groups”; and (b) “Identify and analyze structural inequalities using a recognized theoretical approach.” Your syllabus must address both of these SLOs by specifying how the course’s activities and assignments enable the teaching and assessment of these outcomes.

For preparers’ convenience, we list all goals and SLOs for Diverse Communities courses here:

- **Gen Ed Goal #1: Communicate effectively**
 - SLOs: *Address at least one of the following:*
 - a) Express oneself effectively in common college-level written forms
 - b) Revise and improve written and/or presentations
 - c) Express oneself effectively in presentations
 - d) Demonstrate comprehension of and ability to explain information and ideas accessed through reading

- **Gen Ed Goal #2: Think critically and analytically**
 - SLOs: *Address at least one of the following:*
 - a) Use relevant evidence gathered through accepted scholarly methods, and properly acknowledge sources of information, to support an idea
 - b) Construct and/or analyze arguments in terms of their premises, assumptions, contexts, conclusions, and anticipated counterarguments
 - c) Reach sound conclusions based on a logical analysis of evidence
 - d) Develop creative or innovative approaches to assignments or projects

- **Gen Ed Goal #5: Respond thoughtfully to diversity**
 - SLOs: *Address both of the following:*
 - a) Discuss the historical practices leading to the marginalization of diverse groups
 - b) Identify and analyze structural inequalities using a recognized theoretical approach

Once you have submitted your CIM application, it will first be reviewed by your department chair before proceeding through the CIM workflow until it reaches the Diverse Communities Subcommittee, where it will either be approved or rolled back for requested changes. Once approved, the proposal will be forwarded to CAPC’s General Education Committee, Executive Committee, and General Assembly, before ultimately reaching the Provost for final approval and inclusion in the catalog as a Diverse Communities course.

II) Common Problems

1) Lack of clarity regarding student learning outcomes and their assessment

Problem: The most common problem in Diverse Communities proposals is that the preparer has not yet clearly articulated the required student learning outcomes or explained how the course's activities and assignments meaningfully provide instruction and assessment of those outcomes. For example, the syllabus might name Diverse Communities Gen Ed Goal #5, "Respond thoughtfully to diversity," but leave out its two goal-affiliated SLOs: (a) "Discuss the historical practices leading to the marginalization of diverse groups" and (b) "Identify and analyze structural inequalities using a recognized theoretical approach." Or the syllabus might stop short of clarifying which course activities and assignments provide instruction and assessment of which specific SLOs.

Solution: Preparers are encouraged to consult the Diverse Communities Course Criteria checklist (whose contents are listed earlier in this handbook) for complete information about the goals and SLOs that all Diverse Communities courses must meet, and to make sure that the required information appears on the syllabus. Beyond adhering to the letter of the requirements, however, preparers should seek to clarify how the course activities and assignments meaningfully provide instruction and assessment of those goals and learning outcomes. This explanation can appear when you list the relevant goals and outcomes early in the syllabus, or when you describe your assignments in more detail later in the syllabus. The information can be provided as a table, a bulleted list, or narrative paragraphs, or some combination of those approaches. Whatever format you use, it should be clear to students, faculty, and potential reviewers that there is a meaningful link between the course activities and the goals and SLOs they are intended to achieve. Finally, try not to think of this task as simply a matter of inserting required language into your syllabus; instead, try to see it as ensuring that your course is enabling students to achieve the learning outcomes we advertise when we teach Diverse Communities courses.

2) Exclusive emphasis on "differences"

Problem: The proposed course merely describes different practices—those of the peoples from dominant groups and those of the folks from marginalized communities—in a way that suggests "difference" is the only cause of tension between these groups or the only focus of resistance by the peoples from marginalized groups. Simply listing these practices without providing context about structures of power and privilege reduces the complexity of the cultures, practices, and varied forms of resistance that emerge from marginalized communities. Cataloguing these differences is only the first step in understanding them. Listing differences should be secondary to educating students about how these differences are created and exploited by peoples and institutions in the dominant culture (to establish and maintain dominance), and how peoples from marginalized groups resist and negotiate the characteristics prescribed and established by dominant communities and identities.

Solution: Provide a theoretical explanation and context for *how* the noted differences arise, *how* and *why* these differences are embraced/dismissed/quashed by dominant communities, *how* these differences reflect and rely upon structural and systemic inequalities to maintain the status quo, and *how* these structural inequalities and resulting dominance are resisted and negotiated by peoples from marginalized groups. Note that this solution requires a strong foundation in

theory (see the next section).

3) Lack of explicit theory

Problem: The course presents piles of facts (typically about “difference”) but provides no theoretical framework for understanding how these differences arise, how they operate (to dominate and/or resist), or what sustains them. Or, the course may have a theoretical framework, but the syllabus doesn’t specify clearly enough what that framework is. For example, the syllabus may refer to “current sociological and psychological theories” but stop short of actually naming them or explaining how they provide a framework for the course. Without a clearly defined theoretical framework, students do not know “how to think about what.” As a result, students can be fooled into thinking that “knowing differences” is the same as understanding the creation and function of differences for purposes of marginalizing peoples and/or resisting marginalization.

Solution: Theory is necessary in order to show students *how* hegemony, oppression, and structural inequities are linked so as to guide them to an understanding of how differences are more than simple distinctions between various group practices or cultures. Theory can be thought of as a set of organizational principles (formally stated) of well-specified relations between well-defined phenomena; in the context of a Diverse Communities course, theory tells students how a dominant practice emerges, creates structural inequalities, and exploits those structural inequalities to marginalize other practices and maintain its dominance.

In addition to producing theory-driven knowledge of oppression, J courses can also facilitate theory-driven practice. In applied fields such as the health professions, for example, a nuanced theoretical understanding of diverse communities can provide a foundation for the practice of cultural competence and cultural humility, both of which are central to positive encounters between medical professionals and patients from marginalized groups. Such theory-driven practice can also address social determinants of barriers to care for marginalized groups, thus potentially reducing or eliminating healthcare inequities.

Please keep in mind that Diverse Communities courses are not meant to be courses “in” theory. The proposed course does not necessarily need to center on theoretical debates or probe the deepest complexities of a chosen theory. Instead, the course should incorporate a guiding framework to help students understand what they see, read, and hear. An appropriate theory can be simplified to the level of the course and to the students’ capabilities.

There are many theories available to proposers of Diverse Communities courses. Some examples of useful theories from various disciplines include:

- Critical Race Theory
- Cumulative Disadvantage Theory
- Feminisms
- Functionalism
- Intersectionality
- Marxism
- Postcolonialism
- Postmodernism
- Queer Theory

- Social Conflict Theory
- Social Determinants and Health Inequity
- Social Stratification Theory
- Symbolic Interaction Theory

As stated earlier in this handbook, specific information about a given course's theoretical approach(es) should be included in the narrative and the syllabus. In addition, specific references to the theoretical framework will, ideally, be evident in the course calendar.

4) Lack of correspondence between narrative and syllabus

Problem: The narrative includes a brief mention of a theory to be employed, but there are no readings or class time dedicated to explaining the theory; OR the narrative mentions the marginalized groups covered in the course, but the readings do not address the groups or the manners by which they are marginalized and resist; OR class work, projects, or assignments do not match the issues covered in the narrative.

Solution: These problems (most likely) stem from trying to shoehorn Diverse Communities requirements into what a course already does, making the issues of diverse communities “fit” the course rather than modifying the course meaningfully around the diverse communities’ issues. One solution is to step back and re-envision the course, eliminating what doesn’t fit the terms of the J course, and adding elements that might update or offer alternatives to the existing approaches.

5) Lack of consideration of intragroup differences

Problem: In a course that focuses on a single marginalized community, the narrative and syllabus pay little to no attention to the complex intersectional differences between and among subgroups within that larger community.

Solution: Although many Diverse Communities courses do cover multiple marginalized groups in a single course, it is also possible to teach a J course on just one specific group. For example, *WRH 333: African American Autobiography* carries a J attribute but focuses on African Americans, and *ARH 419: Women in Art* centers on women. However, if this approach is taken, the preparer must pay attention to the intersecting sub-categories that exist within the single studied community. For example, the category of “African Americans” is cross-hatched by gender, sexuality, class, geography, ability, and other markers of difference, as is the category of “women.” This heterogeneity and attention to intersectional nuance must be a key part of any J course, and particularly one that focuses nominally on a single group.

III) Key Terms and Definitions

Here are working definitions of some of the key terms used in WCU's Diverse Communities curriculum:

1) *diverse communities perspective*: a perspective that includes not only an awareness and understanding of the historical, cultural, and ideological sources of structural inequality, oppression, and unequal privilege, but also the ability to view a situation or issue from the perspective of a person in a historically marginalized group. This perspective includes but is not limited to the ability to understand the varied modes and practices of resistance, negotiation, and strategic organizing that peoples from marginalized communities use to challenge the prevailing concepts or practices that are determined by dominant communities and institutions.

2) *historically marginalized groups*: those groups of people who have been historically and systematically excluded from advantage, or oppressed by a dominant group. Categories of marginalization include (but are not limited to) race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, gender, gender expression, sexuality, religion, immigrant status, national origin, language, age, body size, and physical, mental, and developmental ability. One important clarification in the use of this term is that “historically” should not imply “only in the past.” On the contrary, Diverse Communities courses emphasize the reality that marginalization, exclusion, and oppression remain systemic and ongoing today, and that studying the past enables us to better understand such conditions in the present. To cite just one example: present-day disparities in rates of poverty, incarceration, and educational access between whites and African Americans in the United States are direct legacies of the oppressive social and economic hierarchies institutionalized under slavery and Jim Crow. Moreover, Diverse Communities courses should make clear that the ways groups are marginalized—and the multiple methods of resistance used to confront and remedy that injustice—can shift and evolve over time.

3) *informed and reasoned openness*: an attitude that includes acknowledging the viewpoints of others, approaching them with objectivity, and understanding the factual bases of differences in power between peoples from dominant and marginalized groups. An informed and reasoned openness to diversity also means valuing and appreciating the experiences and perspectives of peoples from historically marginalized groups.

4) *just and equitable society*: the university's larger goal in offering a Diverse Communities curriculum is to “graduate students who are committed to creating a just and equitable society.” To that end, J courses do not stop at pointing out problems but also seek to empower students to work toward responses and solutions—either in the course or afterward in other aspects of their lives. (Once students have learned about injustice, what do they *do* about it? How do they *respond* to it in ways that can bring about justice and equity?) In this context, the concept of equity contained in the phrase “just and equitable society” refers to the fair treatment of diverse groups of people in a way that takes into account the specific needs, cultural practices, and lived experiences of peoples from marginalized communities rather than assuming a color-blind, need-blind, or one-size-fits-all approach. “[T]he route to achieving equity will not be accomplished through treating everyone *equally*,” explains the Race Matters Institute. “It will be achieved by treating everyone *equitably*, or justly according to their circumstances.” Understanding the historically rooted disadvantages among peoples from marginalized communities will enable graduates to act more thoughtfully in working to resolve them. (See also “social justice” below.)

5) *social justice*: an approach to diverse communities that values and works toward a more equitable distribution of access, opportunities, rights, resources, protections, privileges, and dignity for all peoples and groups in a society. Social justice work seeks in particular to remedy the injustices and inequities faced by peoples from marginalized communities who have been systematically excluded, exploited, or institutionally disadvantaged by the powerful and privileged in ways that prevent their full participation or recognition as citizens. Social justice work often originates from within marginalized communities and can take many forms, including (most visibly), but not limited to, strategic organizing and mass public demonstrations. In this sense, social justice can be seen not as an outcome per se but rather as a tool that works *toward* the outcome of equity among different groups in a society. The WCU General Education program's "J" designation, which stands for justice, signifies the importance of this social justice orientation in the Diverse Communities curriculum.

6) *structural inequality*: a process and a set of institutional relationships by which peoples from marginalized groups are historically and systematically excluded from advantage or oppressed by a dominant group. These inequalities are established and maintained by peoples from dominant communities, which results in the marginalization of other peoples and their concepts or practices. Peoples from these marginalized communities in turn negotiate and contest the status and meaning of the concepts, practices, and structures maintained by the dominant group. Some examples of structural inequality that have been challenged by members of marginalized communities include, among many others: discriminatory immigration laws throughout U.S. history; incarceration of Japanese Americans in internment camps during World War II; the longstanding denial of civil rights and legal protections for LGBTQ citizens; the practice of redlining and restrictive covenants that enforced racial segregation and limited African American homeownership and wealth accumulation throughout the 20th century; the exclusionary enshrinement of whiteness and heterosexuality as assumed cornerstones of acceptability and normalcy in American life; the longstanding targeting of Black and Brown populations for disproportionate policing and incarceration by a White-controlled criminal justice system; forced sterilization of American Indian women, Mexican American women, African American women, and women from other marginalized groups throughout the 20th century; and forced assimilation of American Indians (e.g., removing children from their families and detaining them in boarding schools) in the 19th and 20th centuries.

IV) Contributors to this Handbook

- The Diverse Communities Handbook was originally created by the 2006-07 CAPC Diverse Communities Subcommittee:

- Rodney Mader (English), Chair
- Chris Awuyah (English)
- Maria Purciello (Music History)
- Lynn Spradlin (Counselor Education and Educational Psychology)
- Rick Voss (Social Work)

- The handbook was subsequently revised into its present form by the ad hoc 2019-20 CAPC Diverse Communities Handbook Revision Committee:

- Andrew Sargent (English), Chair (also Chair of CAPC's J Subcommittee)
- Beatrice Adera (Special Education)
- Janet Chang (Psychology)
- Liam Lair (Women's & Gender Studies)
- Kathleen Riley (Literacy)
- Gopal Sankaran (Health)

Additional Consultants to the 2019-20 revision:

- Cristobal Cardemil-Krause (Languages & Cultures; also Diverse Communities Director of CAPC's Gen Ed Council)
 - Karen Mitchell (Chair of CAPC's General Education Committee)
 - Rónké Òké (Philosophy)
- Some of the material in the "Common Problems" section on pp. 7-9 was originally written by former Diverse Communities committee member Jake Lewandowski (Geography & Planning).