

**What is D without EI: Enhancing Access and Learning through Political, Curricular, and
Data-Centered Reform**

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When I reflect on those who came before me and those who surround me now, diversity in my university appears to have made transcendent strides. However, despite the gains made in structural diversity, similarly intentional efforts toward structural equity and inclusion are not comparable. Enhancing what and how students learn and how they are supported remains a barriered experience across faculties. As the primary beneficiaries to our university's success, students' input, perspectives, and civic responsibility are its greatest, yet most unutilized resource. By fostering political, curricular, and data-centered change, all of which is truly student-centered, my university can enhance each student's learning experience to be more effective and enjoyable.

In 1917, Bertha Hosang Mah became the first Chinese woman to graduate from a Canadian University (Dickie, 1918). In 2027, I will graduate from the same institution and carry forward her legacy with pride. I am deeply grateful for the access to higher education I have had as a Chinese woman, and I am committed to widening that access for others - within and beyond my community.

But diversity, equity, and inclusion in education means more than just accessibility. This claim became clear in my first year, when my culturally diverse friend group - from Jordan to Scotland to Brazil, studying everything from International Development to Physiology - brought rich ideas to our conversations, but felt disengaged in the classroom. Despite the diversity of their lived experiences, they shared a common frustration: sitting through countless lectures that hindered their learning and failed to draw on their unique perspectives to spark meaningful discussion. Many skipped their 300+ seat lectures, choosing ineffective self-study instead. They ran homework through generative AI, letting machines learn instead of themselves. Curved exams became memory dumps, making countless all-nighters feel wasted.

Meanwhile, in my education classes, I sat in lively, discussion-based classrooms where I was encouraged to think, question, and engage. I wrote reflections, read critically, and produced work that cemented my learning and could guide me later. I was actively learning; my friends seemingly were not.

Despite being constantly exhausted, unmotivated, and overwhelmed, they accepted dull lecture halls, high-stress exams, and little support as the norm, assuming the rigor matched the subject. But after sharing Paulo Freire's ideas on banking versus problem-posing in education, my friends began to question why they did not equally deserve engaging, meaningful classes. And I questioned why, despite the visible diversity among them, their diverse learning needs were still ignored by a one-size-fits-all approach.

No one understands the needs of students better than themselves. Thus, to effectively redress the university's failings to reform instruction in accordance with student needs, students must guide the institution's path to change. My uniquely holistic proposal encompasses three intersecting components to create a political, curricular, and data-centered solution, grounded in my lived experiences.

I recently began a year-long tenure as a student senator, providing me with unique insight into university politics. Within months, I saw peers work hard to raise real student concerns, only to be met with tacit responses of disregard. Although I ran for office believing in my responsibility as a university stakeholder, I found the role largely symbolic. Despite being the institution's primary beneficiaries, students are not granted the platform that we deserve as stakeholders. By allocating specific time for student senators to pose concerns, questions, and ideas towards administrators, the university can address important agenda items while also encouraging students to have a greater voice in reforming institutional systemic issues. When students are truly heard and thus empowered, they will inevitably challenge the concerning lack of equity-focused policy and practice. Improving the Senate's collaborative environment by emphasizing student perspectives will allow students to have active representation in the room while influential, reform-based decisions are made.

Still, it is critically important for the university to listen to all students, not just their representatives. Despite having program and career advisors, undergraduate students lack solid mentors during what is typically a challenging transitional period for young adults. The proposed curricular reform includes implementing mandatory student groups led by faculty advisors, thereby fostering community and trust and encouraging students to speak openly about their challenges. Shared struggles can reveal patterns in student learning, providing faculty and administration with the necessary insight to respond

effectively. While university marks a step towards independence, even adults in the workforce benefit from mentors, and coaches, and guidance. Students deserve the same support.

At present, the only opportunity for students to personally recommend change or express need for support is course evaluation surveys. These surveys, answered by a small percentage of students, contribute largely unhelpful data points that lack many real ideas for improvement. As the data reform component of this proposal, the university should hire data scientists, learning specialists, and educational experts to analyze patterns reported by advisors and faculty and use that insight to design targeted reform. Conducting interviews and distributing more enticing surveys can contribute to helpful data collection. While these solutions would be executed by experts, the innovative ideas address student-centered needs.

One of the hardest obstacles in implementing this proposal will be the need to increase hires to support smaller communities of learning. My university's budget cuts across faculties, meant to eliminate an outstanding yearly deficit, suggest significant risk with this proposal. The institution and its supporters may favor proven outcomes over potential, but investing in innovation and meaningful change will ultimately lead to stronger long-term student success. These efforts will not only support more engaged and successful alumni, but also strengthen the university's reputation in the global education community, yielding lasting returns for both the institution and those it serves.

Though access to higher education has made significant strides in diversity in the century between Bertha Hosang Mah and me, diversity without equity and inclusion is negligent at best and harmful at worst. By integrating multiple lenses to reform - political, curricular, and data-informed - my proposal offers a unique way of joining many stakeholder groups to create a collaborative effort towards effective, critical reform.

References

Dickie, F. J. (1918). Interesting Westerners. *Sunset: The Pacific Monthly*, 41, 45–46.

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