
The University Senate

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Disabilities Issues Committee September 25, 2024 Minutes of the Meeting

These minutes reflect discussion and debate at a meeting of a committee of the University of Minnesota Senate; none of the comments, conclusions, or actions reported in these minutes reflect the views of, nor are they binding on, the senate, the administration, or the Board of Regents.

[**In these minutes:** Welcome; Senate Orientation; Office of Equity and Diversity; Narcan Faculty Protection; 2024-25 priorities]

PRESENT: Jennifer McComas(chair), Jeff Baier, Tayler Bryant, Jessica Grittner, Enjie Hall, Jessica Horvath Williams, Jeremy Jenkins, Meryl Lucchesi-Freyberg, Jody Tracy

REGRETS: Abigail Alves

GUESTS: Laurie Cooper Stoll, director, University Senate Office, Mercedes Ramírez Fernández, vice president, Office for Equity and Diversity

1. Welcome

Chair Jennifer McComas welcomed the group and asked the committee to introduce themselves.

2. Senate Orientation

Deena Barker, senate associate, presented the [2024-25 Committee Orientation](#) to the committee. The purpose of the orientation was to provide an overview of the University Senate governance structure, focusing on how it works, particularly the role and functioning of its committees. The presentation highlighted how committees contribute to the broader University system and affect change within the institution. By emphasizing shared governance, which includes collaboration, inclusiveness, and advisory roles, the orientation illustrated how committees can influence University policies and decision-making processes, even though their recommendations are advisory to the administration.

3. Office for Equity and Diversity Guest Speaker

Mercedes Ramírez Fernández, vice president, the Office for Equity and Diversity, began by expressing gratitude for the attendees and outlining the office's priorities related to equity and diversity. The three foundational priorities include increasing representational diversity, cultivating a positive campus climate, and building partnerships across various sectors.

Ramírez Fernández announced a new cohort of faculty fellows and emphasized the importance of their work in areas such as disability justice, health equity, and strengthening relationships

with Indigenous communities. She highlighted ongoing efforts to improve campus climate and mentioned collaboration with a preparedness task force to address policies and student support.

Ramírez Fernández said there is a vital role of faculty and student activists in driving change within higher education and society. Emphasizing the importance of conscious decision-making among students, they reflected on recent conversations with the divest coalition. The aim is to connect students with various offices to address their concerns and explore equitable changes within the community. These dialogues are part of a broader initiative to engage multiple student groups, reinforcing the importance of accountability and collaboration in creating a more inclusive environment.

Ramírez Fernández addressed the importance of engaging with students from marginalized identities, noting the challenges and heated discussions that arise in this context. She shared that despite setbacks, such as the Board of Regents' decision not to divest, students expressed a desire to continue dialogues, emphasizing the significance of laying a foundation for future generations.

The Office for Equity and Diversity (OED) is also developing resources for faculty to manage classroom dynamics amid conflicts such as the war between Israel and Hamas. They aim to help instructors navigate difficult conversations and de-escalate situations while being sensitive to student emotions. An educational program titled "Teaching with Intention," focused on inclusive pedagogy, is being offered to support these efforts.

There is a newly developed course titled "Teaching in Times of Crisis," created in collaboration with various partners within the University of Minnesota. This self-paced course is designed for all educators, aiming to support students during personal or global crises that disrupt their learning. Ramírez Fernández emphasized the importance of aligning intentions with impacts in educational settings.

The Diversity, Inclusion, Justice, and Equity (DIJE) project aimed at faculty, graduate students, and staff, complementing the existing Gopher Equity project for students, was introduced by Ramírez Fernández. This initiative provides resources and a historical context for social justice issues relevant to the University of Minnesota community.

Ramírez Fernández also discussed efforts to address interfaith issues, specifically anti-racism, anti-Semitism, and Islamophobia, through collaborative learning spaces for Christian, Jewish, and Muslim students. This student-led initiative aims to foster dialogue and community engagement.

Throughout her remarks, Ramírez Fernández stressed the need for continuous dialogue and collaboration among students, faculty, and administration to build a more inclusive and understanding campus environment.

Insights were shared about ongoing initiatives to support students and address community concerns at the University of Minnesota. Ramírez Fernández also mentioned the University's efforts to improve the Bias Response Referral Network (BRRN), which tracks incidents of harm and ensures thorough investigations in line with new Title VI guidance from the Department of Education. This collaborative effort involves multiple offices, including general counsel and community standards, to address discrimination, harassment, and conflicts.

In response to a question from Jennifer McComas about the availability of the "Teaching in Times of Crisis" modules and the Gopher Equity Project companion, Ramírez Fernández assured that she would provide easy access to these resources, acknowledging that information can often get lost in the influx of communications at the start of the academic year.

In the context of the preparedness task force convened by President Cunningham, she pointed out the necessity of ensuring that the campus community feels secure and respected, especially during emotionally charged situations. The goal is to create a supportive atmosphere where all students can express their concerns without fear of escalation or harm. It was mentioned that there has been training for staff on how to support students effectively, especially in emotionally charged situations.

Ramírez Fernández underscored the importance of educating the community about the potential consequences of actions, noting that awareness can empower students to make informed decisions. Overall, the aim is to create a safe, supportive environment that encourages open dialogue and minimizes conflict.

4. Old Business

Narcan Faculty Protection legal statement [update](#)

McComas initiated a discussion on old business, specifically regarding harm reduction strategies and the potential for distributing Narcan within the campus community. She highlighted an update from the Office of the General Counsel, which indicated that the University is considering a direction similar to other institutions in terms of providing information and training, but may not be fully committing to distributing Narcan yet.

It was suggested splitting up the task of researching what sister institutions in the Big Ten are doing regarding harm reduction, encouraging committee members to gather information and share findings at the next meeting. This collaborative approach could help strengthen their argument for more comprehensive action.

Jeff Baier emphasized the importance of understanding how opioid settlement funds are being allocated by local governments. He advocated for ensuring that these funds are used for education and recovery initiatives rather than just law enforcement, stressing the need for the University to engage proactively with local officials about the use of these funds.

Overall, the group expressed a desire to gather more information and have a more in-depth discussion in the upcoming meeting to explore actionable steps moving forward.

5. New Business- Open discussion regarding 2024-25 priorities

McComas opened the meeting to discuss the upcoming year and priorities and led a discussion about the initiative to promote awareness and inclusivity for individuals with disabilities on campus, referencing a campaign that had previously been proposed. She emphasized the importance of moving beyond basic awareness to foster genuine connections and accessibility, framing it as an effort to dismantle ableism and promote proactive inclusivity.

McComas mentioned a new resource that she found, which aligns with the committee's goals and includes personal stories and insights on design and inclusivity. It was noted that Keisha Varma, deputy to the vice president & associate vice president, Office for Equity and Diversity, from

Inclusive Design, had directed her to this resource, and highlighted the potential for collaboration with Lisa Marshall from the Office for Equity and Diversity, who is adopting a system-wide approach to these issues.

In the meeting, members discussed ongoing initiatives and expressed enthusiasm about a campaign aimed at increasing awareness of disabilities. Some members indicated interest in participating in this campaign. There was a focus on the importance of exposure and connection to dispel misconceptions about disabilities, similar to issues faced by other marginalized groups.

Additionally, there was a congratulatory note about the launch of a digital accessibility center, highlighting the rapid progress made since support was expressed last year. The conversation then shifted to priorities for the upcoming year, with one member suggesting the need to address voting access for disabled students in light of impending elections.

The discussion highlighted concerns regarding voting access for individuals with disabilities. A member shared an experience where a voter faced challenges due to a temporary disability, emphasizing the importance of accessibility at polling places. It was noted that every polling place is equipped with accessible voting booths and individuals can request assistance if needed.

Additionally, there was a suggestion to provide training for individuals with disabilities on self-advocacy and effective communication, particularly in adversarial situations. The idea was to equip them with skills to navigate discussions about their needs confidently.

The discussion continued to focus on the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities in navigating difficult conversations, particularly in academic settings. There was an emphasis on the importance of training for self-advocacy and effective communication, especially when emotions run high. Members recognized that many students with disabilities might feel unsafe or intimidated in discussions with faculty, which can hinder their ability to speak up. The need for understanding and addressing power dynamics in these interactions was highlighted, with suggestions to develop training that focuses on de-escalation and constructive dialogue.

The committee discussed existing resources, like the "Braver Angels" initiative, which promotes respectful disagreement and could serve as a model for similar training tailored to support disabled individuals. It was agreed that fostering curiosity rather than confrontation in conversations is essential to creating a supportive environment.

With nothing additional, McComas adjourned the meeting

Deena Barker
University Senate Office