Equity & Diversity Survey 2016

Highlights

prepared by the Equity Planning Committee for discussion at the April 12ᵗʰ, 2017 Faculty & Staff Meeting

I. Survey Objectives

To solicit students':
- experiences of discrimination, marginalization, exclusion, and/or invisibility;
- suggestions for addressing equity-related concerns and challenges; and
- suggestions for the role and activities of an equity committee at the School of Social Work (SSW).

II. Methods

- administered via Lime Survey across all SSW cohorts during one required class and/or distributed via email.
- closed and open-ended questions

III. Demographics overview

- 212 students participated
- over half were undergraduates
- following gender, student respondents most often identified language, health/ability, and visible minority/ethnicity as factors contributing to them being put in a position of disadvantage.
- Over three-quarters of participants reported being a member of at least one identity category that put them in a position of disadvantage

IV. Experiences of discrimination, marginalization/exclusion, or invisibility

- over one-third of respondents reported *personal experiences* of discrimination/marginalization/exclusion/invisibility at the School
- Site of these experiences most often identified: *classroom*
- race/ethnicity or socio-economic status were the most often reported factors followed by having an LGBTQ identity and "family status" (e.g. single parents, caregivers, alternative families).
- almost half of respondents reported *having witnessed* such incidents within the school or at their field placement

V. Experiences in seeking support for incidents of discrimination, marginalization/exclusion, or invisibility

- *Fewer than a quarter of respondents reported seeking support for their equity-related concerns and challenges*. Almost half of respondents reported that they either did not know where to turn or were afraid of the consequences if they reached out for support.

VI. Equity-related environment in SSW and in field

- *almost one-third of respondents reported that in some classes, discussions about equity and diversity do NOT seem safe and welcome*
- the majority of students reported positive experiences related to equity in their field placements.
- some indicated that discussions about equity and diversity at field placements did not seem safe; some reported that they have been evaluated unfairly in their field placement on the basis of minority status or identity.

VII. Student views on an Equity Committee for the School

There was very strong overall support for the establishment of an Equity Committee for the School of Social Work.

Over three-quarters agreed with the proposed goals for an Equity Committee at the SSW:
- Foster a welcoming learning environment supportive of people with diverse identities and experiences
- Create safer spaces for dialogue and discussion around issues of equity
- Equip students, faculty, and staff with the resources/skills to navigate these issues
- Advise decision-making bodies regarding the adoption of policies and programs to address equity concerns as required.

The activities rated as having the highest priority were as follows:

- *Facilitating support and accompaniment*—by a neutral party-- for students with equity-related difficulties
- Implementing equity focused training, as well as mentorship & support for faculty, staff & field supervisors; and
- Establishing guidelines for recruitment and retention for both faculty and students.

Students also proposed the following recommendations for the *structure* of an Equity Committee:

> Representation of different student cohorts within the Equity Committee
> Establishment of an independent student body working in parallel with Equity Committee
> Conducting an annual equity survey for students and staff/faculty
>
> **Concrete follow-up and action!**

<div align="center">**Themes**</div>

Theme 1: Advocacy and Access to Support

The need for advocacy by those in positions of power and/or privilege in order to improve students' access to support systems was one of the issues commonly underscored by respondents. Other suggestions included:

- Enhanced student support through the establishment of mediation bodies
- Provision of scholarships for marginalized group members
- Improved support systems for students in transition, and
- The revision of the social work program for better compatibility with family & parental responsibilities.

Theme 2: Safe Spaces & Trust
Survey respondents were invited to make suggestions on possible ways to create safe spaces and develop trust, and mentioned the following:

- Create designated physical spaces to voice concerns (e.g. physical signs such as safe space stickers)
- Establish sharing circles outside of the classroom to discuss equity and diversity-related issues
- Support students establishing closed groups for marginalized group members
- Set up online spaces for anonymous input/questions by students & staff

Theme 3: Systemic Barriers to Openness

Student respondents often reported barriers to openness, such as feelings of powerlessness and stigma associated with mental illness, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender, and racialization. Further, they observed these barriers required attention at the systemic level. A lack of clarity about existing support channels and their effectiveness in protecting students in the face of equity-related issues was also noted as a barrier to openness. Students also talked about feelings of alienation and discrimination, and their reluctance to speak up. Students suggested that faculty and staff:

- Facilitate openness to dialogue about equity-related issues within the classroom and outside class hours
- Acknowledge of existing injustices/discrimination
- Take a position of "not knowing" to allow for further exploration of an equity-related issue where necessary
- Demonstrate transparency in making decisions that affect students

Theme 4: Class Moderation and Teaching Methodology

Respondents proposed ways through which teaching methodology and class moderation in the School of Social Work may be improved:

- Providing structure & direction in discussions
- Facilitating the class so as to balance power dynamics and voices heard in the classroom
- Improving their sensitivity towards --and confidence in--discussing equity related issues with students in the classroom

- Addressing expression of oppressive attitudes when they arise among students in the classroom
- Recognizing insensitivity inherent in requesting input from marginalized group members, expecting them to "teach" others about oppression and marginalization through their personal experiences
- Striving to eliminate their own bias and discriminatory attitudes in discussing various topics

- Integrating AOP in assignments

Theme 5: Equity and diversity-related issues in Field Placements

To improve the field placement experience, students offered a number of suggestions:

- Diversification of field placements (ex. English speaking field placements and/or addition of French speaking ones to allow space for non-French speaking students in English speaking field placements)
- Improvement of field placement selection process to enhance students' chances for field placements that are suited to their needs and areas of interest
- Standardization of reporting procedures in the field (ex. in cases of equity-related complaints)
- Mentorship in field placements by field supervisors
- Enhanced engagement and support by the School of Social Work including a more pronounced role by field liaisons
- Establishment of clear student support channels
- Enable student to evaluate their field supervisors

Areas of Tension

Some tensions were identified in the opinions expressed by students on certain issues and ideas. Spanning across emerging themes, these tensions result from opposing or ambivalent viewpoints within the data, and are worthy of discussion here.

Equity: Some students expressed discomfort with the focus on equity--and the idea that all identities and differences should be respected/accepted—because it conflicts with their deeply held values and/or religious beliefs.

Diversity: Students sometimes mentioned that 'over-focusing' on diversity heightens their inhibitions and prevents them from voicing their opinions for fear of offending others. Respondents also felt that "too much" emphasis on differences may lead to increased divisions.

Marginality: Students held varying opinions about who qualified as a "marginalized" group member, demonstrating the tensions inherent in identity categorization and hierarchies of marginalization.

Safe Spaces: There were also varying perceptions of safe spaces, with some students stating that term is sometimes interpreted as a "free pass" for making oppressive comments.

Openness & Expression: Students also often referred to tensions between voicing opinions and the fear of doing harm to others by expressing those opinions. Marginalized group members also reported tensions between listening to privileged group members talk on behalf of minorities, and being considered a "spokesperson" for having expressed their opinion as a minority group member.

I.   **Feedback from the Equity Forum**

The Equity Forum, held on February 8th, 2017, was designed to bring together students, faculty and staff to: (i) disseminate the results of the Equity Survey; (ii) report on the trajectory of the Equity Planning Committee and progress made to date; and (iii) engage attendees in discussing and memorializing further strategies to promote and sustain equity and diversity at the School of Social Work. Ideas from break-out groups, comprised of attendees of the Forum, are elaborated herein.

The Equity Forum provided the opportunity to report on measures taken to date that respond to suggestions from the equity survey, including:

- Establishing an Equity Committee page linked to School of Social Work website entitled, "School of Social Work (SSW) Equity Planning Committee" (http://www.mcgill.ca/socialwork/news/ssw-equity-planning-committee);
- Refining the definition of equity based on feedback received from students (see Appendix?);
- Initiating trainings on equity related issues for staff/faculty, (the initial training was focused on facilitating anti-oppressive discussions in the classroom about trans-related issues);

Additionally, it was reported that the School has made headway with equity concerns through the following actions:

- Endeavoring to increase faculty diversity with new hires; and
- Endeavoring to increase diversity of the student body through revisions to admissions policies and practices.

After the presentation of survey findings at the Equity Forum, attendees engaged in follow-up discussions in small breakout groups, which later presented their ideas to the whole group. These discussions centered on the overarching themes from the survey and aimed to:

- Encourage open discussion and exchange between students, faculty, staff and field supervisors, on the survey themes;
- Solicit further suggestions on ways to address equity-related issues at the School of Social Work; and
- Identify concrete strategies for implementing proposed suggestions.

Five breakout groups were formed and invited to focus on one of the following themes:

1. Safe spaces, Trust, and Openness
2. Class Moderation and Teaching Methodology
3. Awareness-raising & training
4. Advocacy
5. Field Placements

The following reflects the discussion points from each break-out group, their suggestions and proposed strategies.

1. Safe spaces, Trust, and Openness

- Creating spaces conducive to raising and communicating issues with faculty advisor and student groups;
- Structuring plans in accordance with issues raised in Town Hall discussions

- Conducting workshops that address specific issues within this theme
- Increasing focus on the orientation process at the beginning of the year
- Creating team-building opportunities through outings, dinners, and gatherings
- Providing psychological support and through informal discussions
- Ensuring effective communication of available opportunities
- Improving the visibility of available resources at the School of Social Work and beyond (e.g. signs, pictures and posters, contact information of staff and faculty)
- Improving information dissemination about student associations at the BSW and MSW levels and their ongoing efforts
- Creating opportunities for informal discussion (e.g. open door for a day with the Director to raise concerns and chat)
- Promoting McGill-wide events and services, community-building initiatives and groups/associations

2. Class Moderation and Teaching Methodology

- Conducting workshops with students, faculty and staff to raise awareness about the significance of equity and anti-oppressive practices
- Recruiting specialists to help with/design curriculum to address equity concerns
- Creating structures around resource-sharing among faculty
- Training faculty and students on:
    o Adopting and promoting anti-oppressive practices
    o Acknowledging expertise versus bias
    o Remaining open to feedback, taking a stance of not knowing, and developing comfort with imperfection
    o Recognizing and addressing equity issues in class versus containing conflict

3. Awareness-raising & Training

- Retreat for faculty to engage in approaches to promote equity and safer spaces in the classroom and outside of the classroom
- Faculty classroom evaluation and observation
- Assessment and evaluation of syllabi
- Debriefing sessions in classrooms regarding issues that arise
- Allocation of additional time to beginning of orientation
- Incorporation of preliminary AOP as a required online module for students, staff and faculty
- Integration of AOP content and framework throughout all courses at all levels in the School of Social Work

4. Advocacy

- Increasing the diversity of course content
- Recruiting specialized curriculum consultants
- Advocating for continued student support and establishing appropriate support channels
- Promoting an intersectional understanding of marginalized group members
- Advocating for enhanced funding opportunities
- Improving information dissemination of existing supports
- Addressing equity as a major theme in orientation at all levels

- Assigning cohort advisors to allow continuity in student support, following students throughout their program
- Granting scholarships to part-time students in financial difficulty (e.g. students with family responsibilities)
- Creating in-class information bulletins
- Conducting workshops and trainings

5. Field Placements

- Mentorship by field supervisors in field placements and its systemic integration into field related responsibilities
- Allocation of time and resources for mentorship by institutions receiving social work students
- School, faculty, university-wide mobilization to bring focus on students' need for mentorship
- Establishment of formal reporting process to report discriminatory actions by field supervisors
- Establishment of formal structures for student support in dealing with field placement issues
- Advocacy by the School of School Work on behalf of students aimed at increased recognition of students' value by institutions offering field placement opportunities
- Students' evaluation of field supervisors
- Keeping an ongoing record of students' feedback on their field placement experiences in specific settings, including what field instructors are expecting from their interns. This would help future students select placements that are suited to their needs, learning styles and interests
- Information sharing with students regarding internship possibilities including the use of past students' evaluations of field placements, the respective supervisor's supervision style and the profile of the ideal student as described by the supervisor and/or institution
- Increased emphasis on the role of field liaisons in creating a positive field placement experience
- Training for field supervisors to develop mentorship skills and enhance sensitivity towards equity-related issues