EWU EQUITY LENS POLICY DEVELOPMENT FRAMEWORK

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Introduction

Purpose of the Framework

This framework is designed to guide the development of new policies at Eastern Washington University (EWU), with a particular focus on academic policies that proactively prioritize equity. While the primary emphasis is on academic policy development, the principles and processes outlined here can be effectively applied to other institutional policies. The framework aims to help prevent the creation of new inequities or the reinforcement of existing ones in academic processes and practices, ensuring that policies governing curriculum, instruction, assessment and other academic matters are fair and inclusive and contribute to a welcoming and supportive campus environment for all. This framework aligns with EWU's mission to foster learning experiences that prioritize inclusion, fairness, and personal growth, guided by principles of social justice and commitment to diversity, equity, belonging, and inclusion (DEBI). By embedding equity considerations into the policy development process, EWU can work towards fulfilling its core values and creating a campus where every individual feels a sense of belonging.

Key Definitions

Providing clear definitions in this DEBI policy framework is crucial because terms like diversity, equity, belonging, inclusion and social justice are frequently used, but often can mean different things to different people. Having shared definitions ensures everyone is working from the same understanding, and it prevents misinterpretations that could lead to inconsistent policy application. When everyone has access to the same clearly defined terms, it enables more productive discussions about DEBI goals, ensuring active and effective measurement of progress. Finally, it is important to have well-articulated definitions to provide legal and procedural clarity, which is especially valuable when addressing sensitive situations or when policies are challenged. Below we have provided a few definitions of key terms that are used throughout the framework (Mio, 2021). However, we encourage members of the Eastern community to review these definitions alongside EWU's existing policies and the results of the current needs assessment to ensure the terms accurately reflect institutional context and usage. It would also be important to identify any additional key terms that may need defining within EWU's unique environment.

> **Belonging**: A feeling of being valued, accepted, and supported as a full member of the university community, where one can participate authentically without having to minimize aspects of their identity.
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> **Disparate Impact:** When a policy or practice, though seemingly neutral, has a disproportionately negative impact on members of marginalized or protected groups.
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> **Diversity:** The presence of varied identities, backgrounds, experiences and perspectives within the university community.
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> **Equity**: Fair and just treatment, ensuring resources and opportunities are distributed based on individual needs. Equity is distinct from equality, which assumes everyone starts at the same level and has equal access to resources and opportunities.
>
> **Equity Gap:** Measurable differences in outcomes or experiences between different demographic groups within the university.

Equity Lens: A critical process for analyzing the potential impact of a policy on different groups, particularly marginalized populations, to ensure it promotes fairness and avoids unintended negative consequences.

Inclusion: Practices that ensure individuals feel valued, respected, and part of the community.

Marginalized: Groups or individuals pushed to society's fringes due to their identities or experiences, often facing reduced access to resources, opportunities, and power.

Social Justice: Efforts aimed at providing equal distribution of rights, privileges, opportunities, and resources within a society.

Systemic Barriers: Institutional policies, practices, or structures that create or perpetuate disadvantages for certain groups.

Guiding Principles

These guiding principles serve as a foundational framework for developing, reviewing, and implementing university policies through an equity lens. They are designed to help members of the EWU community who may be developing and/or reviewing policy systematically evaluate how policies impact all members of the campus community, with particular attention to historically marginalized and underserved populations.

Centering Marginalized Experiences

Policy development at EWU must prioritize the needs, perspectives, and lived experiences of marginalized students, faculty, and staff. This priority is particularly crucial for academic policies that directly impact student outcomes and learning experiences, including admission processes, financial aid, course requirements, assessment methods, and classroom practices. This principle recognizes that traditional policy-making approaches often overlook or minimize the challenges faced by underrepresented communities. By intentionally centering these voices and experiences, we create policies that address longstanding inequities and better serve our entire campus community. This requires:

- Meaningful engagement with marginalized groups throughout the policy development process, from initial conception through implementation and evaluation.
- Soliciting and incorporating diverse perspectives, particularly from those who have been historically excluded from decision-making processes
- Special consideration to how different policies might differentially impact various intersecting identities and experiences within the Eastern community

Promoting Access and Opportunity

Every member of the EWU community deserves equitable access to resources, opportunities, and support systems that enable their success. In academic contexts, this means examining how policies affect access to courses, academic support services, learning resources, wraparound services, and educational opportunities. This principle demands that EWU examine how policies either facilitate or hinder access across different populations, and suggests:

- Effective policies must consider various forms of access, including physical, digital, financial, and programmatic.
- When developing policies, consider how different community members experience and interact with university systems and services. This includes examining language accessibility, timing of

services, location of resources, and other factors (e.g., religious observations) that might create barriers for certain populations.

- Policies should actively work to eliminate these barriers and create multiple pathways for community members to access the support they need to thrive

Addressing Systemic Barriers

Systemic barriers within institutional policies and practices often perpetuate inequities, even when individual actors have good intentions. For academic policies, this includes examining traditional educational practices that may disadvantage certain student populations and considering alternative approaches to admissions (e.g., overreliance on SAT/ACT, instruction (e.g., too much focus on Western perspectives, assessment (e.g., overreliance on test-taking outcomes), and academic support (e.g., academic advisors who may have implicit biases).

This principle requires the university community to critically examine and dismantle structures that maintain disparate outcomes for different groups. EWU members who are creating policy must be aware of how historical and current systemic inequities operate within higher education and specifically within Eastern. This involves:

- Analyzing data to identify patterns of inequity
- Examining how policies interact with and potentially reinforce existing barriers
- Developing strategic interventions to create more equitable systems.

Resulting policies should explicitly acknowledge and address institutional practices that have historically disadvantaged certain groups and actively work to transform these systems.

Ensuring Transparency and Accountability

Effective equity-centered policies require clear communication about goals, processes, and outcomes, coupled with robust accountability measures. This principle emphasizes the importance of transparent decision-making processes and regular assessment of policy impacts. EWU must clearly articulate how policies are developed, implemented, and evaluated, ensuring that all stakeholders understand both the intent and practical applications of each policy. This includes establishing specific, measurable outcomes for equity goals and regularly tracking progress toward these objectives. Regular reporting on policy outcomes, particularly regarding their impact on different demographic groups, helps maintain accountability and identifies areas needing adjustment or improvement. It would also be beneficial if EWU created accessible feedback mechanisms that allow community members to share their experiences with policy implementation and suggest improvements.

Equity Policy Review Committee

An equity policy review committee is essential for developing effective and inclusive policies that reflect the lived experiences and needs of the entire EWU community. The committee should be composed of individuals from various backgrounds, roles, and identities, with particular attention to ensuring the representation of historically marginalized groups who may be disproportionately affected by policy decisions. This includes students, faculty, and staff of diverse racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds, gender identities, sexual orientations, abilities, and socioeconomic statuses.

When appropriate, external reviewers may be invited to join the committee to provide an objective perspective, enhance credibility, and bring expertise from outside the institution. This can be especially valuable for policies with broad or systemic implications. Through careful analysis and stakeholder engagement, the committee works to create and maintain policies that support a campus environment where all community members can thrive.

To effectively fulfill its purpose, the equity policy review committee has the following key responsibilities:

- Lead comprehensive equity reviews of new and existing policies to ensure alignment with EWU's principles of social justice and Diversity, Equity, Belonging, and Inclusion, evaluate impacts across demographic groups, monitor outcomes, and recommend modifications to address identified gaps and support institutional strategic initiatives for advancing equity.

- Facilitate inclusive stakeholder engagement through structured feedback mechanisms and community dialogue, with an intentional focus on amplifying marginalized voices and identity-based groups, to ensure policies reflect diverse campus needs and maintain transparent communication throughout development and implementation.

- Conduct proactive equity assessments of proposed policies by analyzing demographic data, evaluating systemic impacts, and developing metrics to identify potential disparities and recommend specific solutions that advance equity and inclusion across university systems.

To fulfill these responsibilities, the committee should maintain regularly scheduled policy reviews, provide quarterly reporting on policy impacts and outcomes, and engage in ongoing collaboration with university departments and units. Success is measured through improved equity outcomes across university programs and services, increased stakeholder engagement in policy development, demonstrated reduction in systemic barriers, and positive feedback from marginalized communities. Through this collaborative and intentional approach, the committee can play a vital role in ensuring that EWU's policies promote equity, dismantle systemic barriers, and foster a welcoming and inclusive campus environment for all.

Inclusive Language and Deficit-Mindedness

Inclusive, person-centered language is essential in policy development to ensure dignity, respect, and equity for all members of the EWU community. Language shapes how policies are understood and implemented, influencing the perceptions and experiences of those affected. Policies should use terms that reflect inclusiveness and reject stereotypes, biases, or assumptions that could marginalize individuals or groups. By adopting inclusive language, EWU can create policies that empower community members and foster a sense of belonging. For example, instead of referring to "at-risk students," policies might use "students facing systemic barriers," acknowledging the external factors contributing to challenges without blaming individuals.

Deficit-minded language, which focuses on perceived shortcomings or deficiencies of individuals or groups, should be replaced with terminology that addresses systemic barriers and emphasizes strengths and opportunities. For example, rather than labeling individuals as "low achievers," policies could reference "students with unmet educational needs," centering the focus on institutional responsibility and support. This shift aligns with EWU's commitment to social justice and advances its core DEBI principles. By prioritizing a systemic focus and reframing challenges in ways that highlight potential and resilience, EWU can ensure its policies advance equity and inclusivity across the campus community.

Guiding Framework for Equitable Policy Development

This comprehensive guide provides a structured framework for developing and implementing policies at EWU with equity in mind. The framework ensures that each stage of policy development actively advances Eastern's commitment to social justice and principles of DEBI. This guide is designed to support members of the EWU policy creators through each critical phase of development, from initial conception through long-term evaluation.

A. Drafting Stage

During the initial drafting of a new policy, consider the following questions:

- **Purpose and Goals:**

  o What is the specific purpose of this policy? What issue or need is it addressing?

  o How does this policy align with EWU's mission, values, and strategic goals?

  o How does this policy advance EWU's core principles of social justice and DEBI?

  o How does this academic policy impact student learning outcomes and educational experiences across different student populations?

- **Outcome Definition:**

  o What are the specific measurable outcomes expected from this policy?

  o How will it improve the experiences of EWU students, faculty, and staff?

  o What positive institutional changes should result from this policy?

  o How will success be defined and measured?

- **Impact Analysis:**

  o Which student, staff and faculty groups will be most affected by this policy?

  o Could this policy have a disparate impact on specific groups, particularly those historically marginalized? If so, how can this impact be mitigated?

  o For academic policies, how might the policy affect different learning styles, educational backgrounds, and academic preparation levels

  o How can we include diverse voices and perspectives in the drafting process?

- **Data and Evidence:**

  o What data or evidence informs the creation of this policy?

  o What academic performance data or student success metrics inform this policy?

  o Are there relevant findings from equity audits, needs assessments, or other research that should guide the policy's development?

  o Does the policy address a specific equity gap or concern identified in the needs assessment?

B. Review Stage

Before finalizing the policy, ensure it undergoes a thorough review process:

- **Community Feedback:**

  o Has the policy been reviewed by diverse stakeholders, including students, faculty, and staff from marginalized communities, as well as members of the community that may have opposing views or perspectives?

  o How has feedback been gathered? (e.g., focus groups, surveys, open forums)

  o Has the policy been revised based on the feedback received?

- **Compliance and Equity Check:**

- Does the policy comply with all relevant legal and regulatory requirements related to equity and nondiscrimination?

- Has the policy been reviewed for potential unintended consequences or disparate impacts?

C. Implementation Stage

Once the policy is finalized, consider these factors during implementation:

- **Resource Allocation:**

  - What resources (financial, human, structural) are required to implement this policy effectively and equitably?

  - How will these resources be allocated and distributed?

  - Are there any potential barriers to equitable resource allocation? If so, how will they be addressed?

- **Communication and Training:**

  - How will the policy be communicated to all stakeholders (students, faculty, staff)?

  - How will faculty be supported in implementing new academic policies equitably in their classrooms and programs?

  - Will training or education be provided to ensure everyone understands the policy and its implications?

  - How will questions and concerns about the policy be addressed?

- **Metrics and Monitoring:**

  - What metrics will measure the policy's effectiveness in promoting equity and achieving its intended outcomes? How will equity outcomes be tracked?

  - How will this data be collected, analyzed, and reported?

  - Who will monitor the policy's impact and make adjustments as needed?

This framework helps to ensure that new policies at EWU are developed and implemented to prioritize equity, inclusivity, and the well-being of all campus community members. Regular review and updating of this framework itself will help maintain its relevance and effectiveness in supporting EWU's commitment to creating an inclusive and equitable campus environment.

References

Mio, J. S. (2021). Multicultural psychology: Understanding our diverse communities (5th ed.). Oxford University

Press.