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The Diversity and Inclusion Fellowship is part of a multifaceted initiative for faculty to reflect on and combat educational injustice in the classroom.

Diversity and Inclusion Fellowship faculty leaders, Laura D’Amore, associate professor of American studies (left), and Kamille Gentles-Peart, associate professor of communication and media studies (right), collaborate on plans for growing equity initiatives.

April 8, 2019 | Julia Rubin

BRISTOL, R.I. – For the last 400 years that higher education institutions have existed in North America, they have mainly served white men. Even after they started to accept women and people of color – for most that occurred just within the last century – the curriculum, teaching practices and faculty of many institutions still reflect this history.

As university classrooms continue to diversify, students of historically underrepresented racial, economic, gender, and sexual identities are often singled out, underestimated, and discriminated against. This causes harm, not just to the academic success, but also to the mental and physical wellbeing of students in a system that wasn’t designed for them.

At RWU, two faculty members, Laura D’Amore, associate professor of American studies and Kamille Gentles-Peart, associate professor of communication and media studies, are leading an initiative to support faculty in challenging inequitable traditions.

“We are the people who engage with students the most for the four years that they’re here,” said Gentles-Peart. “They sit in our classrooms for four months at a time, so if we’re not ready to challenge existing hierarchies and create safe and brave spaces, that’s four years that students are being harmed or not being asked to challenge their own world and beliefs.”
Kamille Gentles-Peart, associate professor of communication and media studies

D’Amore and Gentles-Peart collaborated with other faculty members who were also determined to combat inequities in the classroom. They sought to bring in educational resources, strategic planning, and peer discussion.

In order to achieve this, they secured funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation last summer. With this support, they spent four days at a conference on Diversity, Civility, and the Liberal Arts in Atlanta, Georgia, along with then RWU Provost Andrew Workman and RWU Chief Diversity Officer Ame Lambert.

“We discussed everything from use of language, to personal privilege, to roles of educators in the classroom, to the institutional treatment of minoritized populations,” said Gentles-Peart.

Though each day was full of important work and deep reflection, this was just the beginning of what is a multi-level, ongoing initiative at RWU. The next step was to roll out a plan for bringing what they learned to campus.

“Our team realized that the work that is required of an institution that makes a deep commitment to equity, inclusion, diversity, and social justice happens through its people – primarily the faculty and the staff,” said D’Amore. “If we were going to be able to do the work meaningfully, we would have to invest a lot of time and resources into faculty and professional development, providing folks at RWU with the time and space to think and talk about this material.”
The first step of this investment was a year-long faculty fellowship, which the two launched last fall.

Gentles-Peart, D’Amore, and 14 additional faculty members met several times throughout Fall 2018 to begin an in-depth process of learning and reflection, inspired by the work initiated at the institute in Atlanta.

“We have faculty representatives from just about every school in the university,” said Gentles-Peart. “We have visual artists, engineers, writers. We have professors in communication and media studies, psychology, anthropology, American studies, education, and historic preservation.”

The fall semester was spent grappling with hard questions about how to make sure students of all backgrounds can thrive in the classroom.

“The work the Diversity and Inclusion Fellows are doing is figuring out how to create equitable classrooms and teaching practices within historically unjust spaces,” said D’Amore. While it’s built on similar principles the work can look different in every course.

One of the fellows, Michael Rich, professor of art, is making several deliberate changes to his figure drawing class.

The first is honoring each student’s individual style. He makes time for one-on-one portfolio reviews where he and the student discuss the student’s unique influences and techniques.

“They have to learn how to draw no matter who they are and what their background is,” said Rich. “But they are becoming better drawers in their own language. Part of this is reframing the idea that they have to meet some classical ideal in their drawing. They’re going to bring to the table different experiences, backgrounds, and cultures.”
Along with embracing diverse drawing styles and student experiences, Rich is shifting the content of his class. With drawing’s historical focus mainly on white European men looking at women, Rich used the opportunity of his students drawing human bodies to discuss representation and power dynamics.

“I want to use the body as a vehicle to talk about issues of race, gender, sexuality, and individuality, rather than studying the body on just a formal level,” Rich said.

Rich also seeks to deepen conversations about representation by exposing his students to artists from underrepresented identities. Not only is this important for his students, but it is also expanding his own education as an artist, and at the same time, he is noticing the gaps in his knowledge where he needs to do more research.

Though the fellows are becoming more deliberate about inclusion in the classroom, Rich notes that it is the self-education and self-reflection that has been the most impactful aspect of this work.

And that’s not only true for Rich. The other fellows affirm that much of this work is about faculty members raising their own consciousness so they can become better educators.

“The way I look at it is that inclusive teaching is better teaching. It’s more engaged, more cognizant of the student, their background and their challenges,” Rich said. “It’s making me a whole lot more aware of institutional and structural challenges, and particularly how they affect minoritized students.”

Margaret Case, chair of the Department of English Literature and Creative Writing, agrees that much of her work as a fellow involves self-reflection. In the meetings with the other fellows, she confronts her own challenges and gains insight through readings and conversation.

“It changes the way I think about dynamics in the classroom and keeps diversity issues in the forefront of my mind while I’m teaching,” Case said.
Case has always made a deliberate effort to teach a diverse range of literature, yet participating in the fellowship has solidified the need for being intentional about this effort.

“I think the power of literature is absolutely huge, not only in figuring out who we are, but in figuring out how the world should be structured,” she said.

Though the fellows are working hard to create change in their classrooms, the project will not end here. This summer, the fellows will teach this curriculum to up to 25 more faculty from across the university. Next year, a second cohort of eight fellows will teach 25 more faculty, so that over two years, this intensive development will be offered to as many as 75 faculty members.

“An investment in faculty in this way signals our importance to the success of the university,” said D’Amore. “These 75 faculty will then be in positions to share information and strategies with peers, and become leaders in this work. I’m optimistic and excited about that future.”