

Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Seminars: What They Do and Do Not Do

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Abstract

Universities are increasingly acknowledging the importance of promoting social justice within academic communities. In this article, social justice practitioners from the Scientific Staff Association at ETH (AVETH) critically evaluate the role of seminar series in promoting social justice within academia. We use the 2020 AVETH Social Justice Seminar Series focused on anti-racism as a case study. We discuss the importance of seminar series to provoke initial action and reinforce positive behavior changes to equip individuals with the tools and knowledge to fight for systemic changes. We also provide concrete examples of actionable steps people can make at the individual and institutional levels to promote social justice using information sourced from the seminar speakers and their publications. We also disclose the limitations of seminar series and reinforce the importance of accompanying actionable initiatives and tangible goals. Our goal is to bring awareness to the importance of following up such seminar series with concrete actions that challenge injustice and promote practices of self-reflection to truly combat systemic discrimination in academic institutions.

Introduction

Have you ever followed a Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) document or seminar series around? Where does it go, who does it effect, what does it challenge, and to what and whom does it appeal? We are a group of social justice practitioners and members of AVETH, the Association of Scientific Staff at ETH, and we often ask ourselves these questions about our voluntary JEDI work. None of us are social justice scholars, but we are constantly encouraged to re-think our strategies of JEDI work. Firstly, because of the way our own identities influence our status in the academy, and secondly, because we want to better understand and champion for JEDI so that everybody at ETH has the chance to thrive academically and professionally. To attract greater interest on JEDI, we organized the first annual AVETH Social Justice Seminar Series in Fall 2020 focused on anti-racism and inclusion in institutions, classrooms, and labs. The seminars were recorded and are freely available here: <https://www.aveth.ethz.ch/diversity-seminar-series/>. Here, we will offer a different account of the 2020 AVETH Social Justice Seminar series that places this initiative in a critical context of institutional diversity work.

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To begin, we will discuss the motivation behind initiating the annual seminar series about social justice. Put simply, there were few other consistent opportunities to learn about social justice at ETH even though diversity is one of the five values of the institution. In fact, there remain relatively few opportunities to learn about JEDI at ETH, a sign that JEDI has historically not been highly valued; otherwise, it would be more alive in the ETH culture. What institutions value, becomes part of institutional culture. If your lab has lunch together every Thursday, eventually Thursday lunches become part of lab culture. If your lab only plans to have lunches but seldom does, this situation is comparable to ETH claiming diversity as a value, having an equal opportunities office, but JEDI not yet being core to the University culture. Of course, there are many bottom-up initiatives, but these alone cannot change the culture of ETH in the absence of consistent top-down support. ETH is a frame where certain issues have existed since 1855. If discrimination happens frequently (e.g. sexism, racism, ableism) or initiatives for anti-discrimination occur infrequently (e.g. events, discussions, and trainings about JEDI), then particular individuals and identities feel the burden of exclusionary cultures and the need to take up what has been estranged by institutions. With our privilege of higher education, we feel a deep responsibility to create opportunities for everybody to find an entry-point to take-up the cause of social justice to create a transformative culture of just and equitable opportunity. This seminar series was an entry-point for some and an opportunity to learn and sharpen new skills for others.

What a seminar series can do

A seminar series might be able to provoke an initial action or reinforce positive behavioral changes which better equip people to fight for systemic changes. As seminar speaker, Dr. Shaila Kotadia discussed, there are three main pedagogical areas to create individual behavioral changes for JEDI work: [1] critical understanding of identity and positionality, [2] exploration of the current and historical oppressive infrastructures that have arrested progress towards a just future, and [3] development of culturally aware praxis [self-reflection] to substantiate transformative and inclusive change (Kotadia et al. 2020). Of course, a four-part seminar series is not sufficient to deeply engage with these pedagogical areas, but it can be an on-ramp towards fostering greater anti-oppressive praxis. Dr. Kotadia additionally shared eight guiding questions when taking actions that should be routinely reflected upon by everybody seeking to make systemic changes (Table 1).

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1. What are the dominant narratives or hegemonic views you hold and how have they kept you from seeing other's full humanity?
 2. What are the skills/talents and power/privileges you have?
 3. What community are you seeking to be a part of and why?
 4. How and whom in the community have you been in conversation with regarding community needs? Please include three to five of the community-stated needs.
 5. How does your praxis project integrate with (and enhance) the community-level work already in existence and the community's stated needs?
 6. What is the potential sustainable impact/benefit of this project will have on the community and how could your power/privilege/talents contribute to sustainability?
 7. How might you benefit from doing this project and how is this work you are doing transform the reality you and the oppressed are in?
 8. Do the benefits to the community outweigh the benefits you glean from performing praxis? Please detail the benefit-balance in your answer.
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Table 1: Guiding questions for self-reflection when taking actions for social justice. These questions were shared by Dr. Shaila Kotadia (Director of Culture and Inclusion, School of Medicine, 2020) during the 2020 AVETH Social Justice Seminar Series.

An additional goal of the seminar series was to share individual steps to promote inclusive teaching in the classroom and lab. Dr. Catherine Shea-Sanger provided clear and actionable steps for promoting inclusion in the classroom drawing from evidence based principles in

inclusive pedagogy and universal design of learning. Dr. Shea-Sanger emphasized that students learn more when they have a sense of belonging in the classroom and curriculum and how this can be best achieved by moving away from an ‘accommodation model’ to an ‘inclusion model’. While this transition may be challenging, there are plenty of easily actionable strategies accessible to educators with little-to-no exposure to an inclusion model. For example, you could diversify your course materials, references, and examples to deliberately include traditionally less acknowledged scholars or cultural contexts in the curriculum. You can learn more about these topics and actionable strategies from her recent open access book (Sanger 2020). Dr. Bala Chaudhary discussed her recent paper Ten simple rules for building an antiracist lab (Chaudhary and Berhe 2020). These rules are summarized in Table 2 and provide an important blueprint for creating personal and institutional transformations. These two seminars provide actional steps that every member of the ETH community can bring into the classroom, their mentoring, and respective labs and offered the most tangible ways in which most participants of the seminar series can do something at an individual level to promote JEDI. While it is the responsibility of mentors, teaching assistants, and educators to teach and to mentor, many are doing so without any formal training. Thus, opportunities to learn more about inclusive pedagogy and universal design of learning would have positive effects that ripple throughout ETH.

The final seminar speaker, Dr. Maria Miriti also shared clear strategies to fight injustice in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) and provided important clarity on the importance of making systemic changes. A key takeaway from this talk is that institutions cannot simply hire their way to JEDI. A recent editorial article published in Nature Ecology and Evolution claims: “As scientists, we have choices about who we hire, who we collaborate with, who we cite and what we teach. Admitting students and recruiting junior researchers and faculty is perhaps where the biggest failing of academic institutions occurs.” (Black Lives Matter in ecology and evolution, 2020). This statement is inaccurate, as Dr. Miriti and others summarized in a recent response article (Miriti et al. 2020). Black and latinx students enter STEM at the same proportions as white students, but switch or leave majors due to inequities that privilege white colleagues (Rigle-Crumb et al. 2019). Thus, recruitment is not the biggest failing of academic institutions. Rather, it is the culture in academic institutions that deters retention.

	Description	Actionable steps
Rule 1	Lead informed discussions about antiracism in your lab regularly	Organize recurring events to read and discuss papers on anti-racism and social justice with your team. You can find papers <i>via</i> AVETH as the diversity group hosts a social justice reading club and maintains a reading list on their website. A good list is also available <i>via</i> the Diversity at Stanford Medicine website: https://med.stanford.edu/diversity/content/certificate-in-critical-consciousness-and-anti-oppressive-praxis.html#resources
Rule 2	Address racism in your lab and field safety guidelines	When orienteering new members, explicitly include a statement about the importance of inclusion within your group, expectation of conduct, and how issues of discrimination can be dealt with in a safe environment. Learn about the Ombudspersons and Confidants and explain their roles to new team members: https://ethz.ch/en/the-eth-zurich/organisation/ombudspersons-and-trusted-intermediaries.html Share that if someone needs advice related to their work, including issues of bias or misconduct, that they can confidentially contact the AVETH counseling group: https://www.aveth.ethz.ch/counselling/counselling-info/

Rule 3	Publish papers and write grants with Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC)	When collaborating, strive to be less insular and deliberately seek collaborations with BIPOC experts in the field from within and outside of ETH.
Rule 4	Evaluate your lab's mentoring practices	Have mentors in your lab ever been trained on effective mentorship? Read papers on effective mentoring that draw from evidence-based techniques and share with your group (e.g. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2020; Montgomery and Page, 2018). Further, encourage or help students to find external mentors through cultural affinity-based professional societies.
Rule 5	Amplify voices of BIPOC scientists in your field	Make an effort to cite the work of BIPOC scholars when it is the appropriate citation. Following new scientists on social media or google scholar will keep you connected with new research.
Rule 6	Support BIPOC in their efforts to organize	Attend events organized by BIPOC scholars to learn about on-going efforts and show up to advocate for these initiatives.
Rule 7	Intentionally recruit BIPOC students and staff	If you are hiring for a new position, disseminate your job posting and identify candidates using professional organizations and listservs supporting BIPOC researcher and collaborations (e.g. www.minoritypostdoc.org/jobs , www.diversityinresearch.careers/ , www.sareco.org/) and reach a larger audience when posting jobs on social media using specific hashtags (#BlackandSTEM, LatinxandSTEM).
Rule 8	Adopt a dynamic research agenda	Be open to and support projects that may fall slightly outside of your expertise because scholars from marginalized backgrounds tend to drive more innovative, cross-disciplinary work (Hofstra et al. 2020).
Rule 9	Advocate for racially diverse leadership in science	Nominate BIPOC scientists whom you admire for research awards. At ETH, you can identify teaching and research awards here: https://ethz.ch/en/the-eth-zurich/portrait/awards.html
Rule 10	Hold the powerful accountable and don't expect gratitude	Learn how to be an effective bystander <i>via</i> trainings and readings and identify people/places where you can report misconduct with options for anonymity. Advocate for your department or ETH to offer regular trainings on bystander intervention. Establish protocols within your group to report misconduct both within and outside of your lab.

Table 2: Ten rules to build an anti-racist lab shared by Dr. Bala Chaudhary from Chaudhary & Berhe (2020) and an additional column with actionable steps tailored to the ETH community.

Low retention of people from marginalized identities in STEM can only be countered by moving beyond performativity and via institutional changes. For example, Dr. Miriti discussed how current standards of success, which focus narrowly on productivity and fast science frequently neglect the higher teaching and service loads by many people of color who do not receive broader professional recognition. Indeed, diversity work is unevenly distributed among the people most affected by lack of JEDI. In addition to having teaching and service work go unrecognized, underrepresented groups produce higher rates of scientific novelty, but these innovations go un-recognized, are devalued, and discounted (Hofstra et al. 2020).

People from marginalized identities are also frequent targets of overt oppression. For example, exclusionary behavior is the major factor driving lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ) STEM faculty members out of academia (Patridge et al. 2014). Both overt oppression and covert actions, including daily microaggressions or subtle jokes, are experienced by many within the ETH domain, as evidenced by testimonials shared during the 2021 Speak Up ETH campaign (<https://www.instagram.com/speakupeth/>). If institutions, including ETH, are serious

about increasing JEDI, the transformative cultural shift being advocated by those with less power in the academic hierarchy, will need to be taken more seriously and given more power with greater top-down support.

The limitations of seminar series and performativity

It is essential to acknowledge that a seminar series alone will not transform institutional culture. For this reason, it is important to disclose why everyone should be critical of these initiatives despite well-intentioned motivations. Creating an impactful seminar series is not easy, but in the scheme of creating transformative cultural shifts within academia, it is a relatively simple action. No seminar series can be a tick-box to signify commitment to JEDI. Commitment does not exist without other actionable initiatives and tangible goals. Seminar series without additional actions is performative, which creates a myriad of reinforcing issue, as discussed more below.

Diversity acts, such as a JEDI seminar series, can work to conceal and reinforce systems of oppression. As Sara Ahmed outlined in *On Being Included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*: "...diversity has a commercial value and can be used as a way not only of marketing the university but of making the university into a marketplace. Others have called this the 'Bennetton model' of diversity, in which diversity becomes an esthetic style or way of rebranding an organization." (Ahmed 2012). Seminar series can easily fit into an esthetic style because they inherently carry no commitment at either the grassroots or administrative levels. If a seminar series or JEDI initiative is used to create market value for an institution then it is about the politics of image and changing perceptions, not social justice.

Performative JEDI actions are not simply ineffective but inflict harm on the people they claim to support. For example, diversity documents can allow organizations to gesture that they are committed to diversity [or anti-racism] even when racist behavior goes unpunished and concrete diversity initiatives are lacking. More specifically, diversity documents have been weaponized by university communications to block the recognition of racism by students of color (Ahmed 2007). Performativity can also signal that an institution is more diverse and inclusive than it really is in the absence of true commitments to JEDI.

If you are planning a seminar series or panel on JEDI, we encourage you to consider how this event is part of a larger social justice context. By deeply reflecting on points 6-8 in Table 1, you will be able to plan more impactful JEDI projects and events. Practically speaking, it is critical to offer honorarium in a timely manner to seminar speakers for their work. If a potential speaker is a scientist, it is important to also consider giving them the opportunity to discuss their research. If you or a team member experiences discomfort because of the way somebody with less power speaks about justice, remember that most of society will accommodate your notion of civility – it is essential to not police the tone with which anybody with less power communicates. Often, important messages shared by a JEDI seminar speaker will make those who experience the most privilege (whether consciously or unconsciously) uncomfortable.

This article began by considering where a seminar series goes, who it effects, what it challenges, and to what and whom it appeals. To answer these questions, a seminar series does not go very far, even if it reaches a large audience like the 2020 AVETH Social Justice seminar series. However, such organized events can be a starting point for further actions, a component of a larger JEDI initiative/project, and begin to normalize discussions about diversity and inclusion within the culture of an institution. However, a seminar series without further actions challenges little and appeals and encourages to performativity JEDI initiatives, which hinders progress. As Angela Davis said in her recent Vanity Fair interview with Ava Duvernay, "Diversity and Inclusion without substantive change, without radical change accomplishes nothing."

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