

Real Eau-topias: EDI and the Resources Students Need for Free Expression and Success at UWEC

University of Wisconsin
Eau Claire



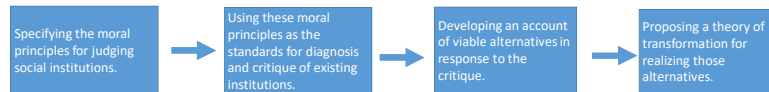
Rachel Libera, Caroline Morris, and Peter Hart-Brinson | Sociology

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research project was to understand students' perspectives on the values of equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI), and the resources that the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire has to offer. This research aims to uncover what exactly the students expect of the University regarding EDI and resources and to provide feedback to help UWEC to achieve its EDI goals. The two student researchers conducted a total of seven focus group interviews with 25 students to measure their group perspectives and collected data from both pre and post questionnaires to measure various demographics and personal opinions. Focus group participants were drawn from a variety of programs, organizations, and naturally-occurring social groups from the researchers' personal networks. In general, focus groups discussed EDI in terms of potential for progress: participants recognize the steps that the University is taking towards its goals but are critical of their actual accomplishments. Resources are talked about as supplemental services that should be provided to students who need them, rather than core aspects of higher education that everyone utilizes. These results reflect an acceptance that students have relatively small power for change and an assumption that change happens at the administrative level.

REAL UTOPIAS

The theory of a "real utopia" was first proposed by Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright. The focus on "real utopia" research consists of the promotion of "human flourishing" and equality by learning from real-world models and best practice that have proven to be effective in other places. "Utopia reflects the human longing for escape from the oppressions, disappointments, and harsh realities of the real social world" (Wright, 2017). Although utopias do not exist, "real utopias" do. Examples include urban participatory budgeting, Wikipedia, and unconditional basic income. Wright argues that providing equal access to resources and social conditions will assist in creating a prosperous life. Wright identifies four specific tasks aimed towards the development of a real utopia as illustrated below.

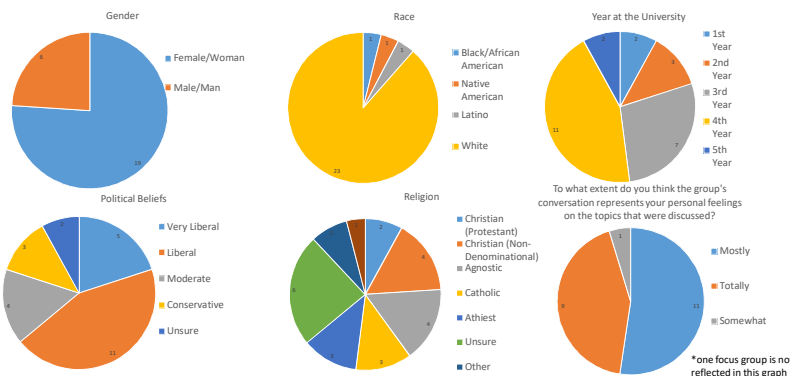


Equity, diversity and inclusivity (EDI) are the moral principles that UW-Eau Claire has established for itself, so we focused on the second and the third tasks from above. The exploration of these tasks consisted of collecting data to see what students feel is lacking in their personal resources. The University defines EDI as "central priority to campus" naming one of its goals as to "identify specific areas that will allow us to maximize the impact the EDI efforts have on campus" (The Board of Regents of University of Wisconsin System, 2019) This project seeks to uncover students' personal experiences and feelings about these principles that the UWEC proposes.

METHODOLOGY

This research involved conducting 7 focus groups with 25 UWEC students. In addition to our focus groups pertaining to resources, we also worked with two other student researchers who conducted their own focus groups on EDI and similar topics. We recruited for focus groups on the basis of being in the same classes or organizations. We specifically looked for close friend groups in an attempt to create natural and comfortable conversation. Groups included students from Student Senate, Blugold Marching Band members, Geography major students, music students, Spanish Students, American Sign Language students, and Resident Assistants. As seen below, focus group participants do not represent our current student body at the University in terms of demographics. Instead, we attempted to capture the daily conversational dynamics between familiar groups of people.

Each of the focus groups were asked IRB (Institutional Review Board) approved questions. The participants were also given pre and post questionnaires providing some information on their ethnicity, economic status, political affiliation, and employment status as well as their satisfaction and any other comments to make once the session was concluded. Our questions focused on a range of topics but specially focused on positive experiences, equity, diversity, inclusivity, and resources available on campus.



RESULTS

Through our research, we found five common themes.

Support for EDI

All seven of our focus groups support the values behind EDI—Equity, Diversity, and Inclusivity—if not the actual policies. Students saw the University taking clear strides to being a more inclusive campus but felt the University has to represent the student body (e.g. in promotional materials) for what it is. Students also supported setting standards to make all students equitable, but they have to make it evident that these standards are for all students, not just one group. The University is striving to become more diverse, which four of the groups see as a positive.

EDI as Gold Sticker

Three groups were critical of EDI as it is implemented. Students feel that the administration and some of the more notable faculty members seem to undermine the student population and almost tokenize the idea of inclusivity. It seems that the University is, in a way, "demanding inclusion", as one student said. This was deemed offensive to students of color because of the way that EDI bolsters the University's image, while providing little support to students.

Access to Resources

Students recognized resources as supplemental services that should be provided to those students in need rather than a service that every student should utilize. The groups commented on the difficulty of finding out about student resources. The wide variety of personal, emotional, academic, and economic resources on campus are known by few of the students.

Effectiveness of Resources

For the students in six groups, they acknowledged the presence of the resources that the University has to offer but were not quite sure how well they operate. Specifically speaking on the Counseling services at the University, students in five of the groups discussed that it was nice the University provided this resource for students, but it doesn't adequately help the students, leaving them feeling dissatisfied.

Powerlessness

Students in four groups feel like they have minimal say in change in this University. They feel that the administration will listen to the concerns brought up by the students but they never act on it. Students feel that the administration is almost working against them, they will act on the needs of other administrators but never on the needs of students.

DISCUSSION

As illustrated by the results, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire has significant hurdles to overcome in order to develop a "real utopia" in the minds of its students. Students at the University recognize the principles and standards that the University has set for itself to embody the ideals of EDI and student resources. The students recognize the University's efforts to achieve their EDI goals, however the four common themes above—EDI as Gold Sticker, Access to Resources, Effectiveness of Resources and Powerlessness—show that improvements need to be made. Students don't feel like they have the knowledge or power to create the changes that are needed, but their voices and experiences need to be heard. Throughout the University's ongoing work to achieve its EDI goals, students are the ones that need to continue to be critical in order to move toward the idea of a real utopia.

REFERENCES

Babbie, Earl R. *The Basics of Social Research*. Wadsworth, Cengage Learning, 2014.
 "Diversity Vision Goals." University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. www.uwec.edu/diversity/diversity-vision-goals/
 Lunt, Peter, and Sonia Livingstone. "Rethinking the Focus Group in Media and Communications Research." *Journal of Communication*, vol. 46, no. 2, 1996, pp. 79-98.
 Morgan, David L. "Focus Groups." *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1996, pp. 129-152.
 Wright, Erik Olin. "Real Utopias." *Performing Utopias in the Contemporary Americas*, 2017, pp. 151-160.
 Wright, Erik Olin. "Transforming Capitalism through Real Utopias." *American Sociological Review*, vol. 78, no. 1, 2012, pp. 1-25.

"Like, I'm learning about diversity but I am not seeing diversity on campus and I think that should change, I want to learn it, and I want to see it"

"EDI is kind of like a gold sticker, it doesn't do much for the people of color, its not really helping us, we are given certain boundaries we cannot cross. [...] If they actually asked us what do we need, I feel like they would get a much better response and would see us more"

"I hadn't really heard about all of them [Services for Students with Disabilities] I assumed it was just extra time for tests [...] I didn't know like all of things that could actually help me."

"Resources are accessible and are broadcasted successfully but they aren't always effective."

"They [administrators] will sit there and listen to you but they won't actually change it for what you want."