

# Building an equitable and inclusive community

## Voices from the Polytechnic cohort on diversity and inclusion

*By Charity Hume, Upper School English teacher and 11th grade dean*

When our community at Poly developed a mission statement, we sought to embrace the intellect, talents, and character of each of our students. We continue to dedicate ourselves to those practices that celebrate the uniqueness and dignity of each and every individual in our community. For the past two years, a group of Poly adults has taken a closer look at what that commitment can look like as we think about issues of diversity. During this time, the cohort on diversity and inclusion was formed by a number of volunteers from Poly's faculty and staff from across the school. Our conversations were guided by Dr. Enid Lee, a celebrated leader in multicultural education.

We met together in monthly meetings to share projects, discuss challenges, and think about issues of equality in our community. In addition to race, we considered gender identity, learning profile, age, professional roles, social class, and educational access. Inclusion of all our students and adults, in all the ways that they may feel marginalized, became central to our thinking. With the support we experienced in the cohort, and with Lee's guidance, many of us felt encouraged and empowered to broaden the ways in which we seek to live up to the ideals of our school's mission. In these conversations, Lee grounded our work in the following equation: Practice plus evidence equals change.

Our work in the cohort began with questions of identity. Robert Farrar, History Department co-chair and Middle School teacher, expressed the need for more focus on historical and contemporary issues related to African-American males in particular. "Specific issues related to Poly included curriculum, instruction, admissions, athletics, and mass media coverage, the latter of which needs to be explored in order to provide all of this community with objective information to create an environment that is welcoming and accepting for our African-American young men," Farrar explains. Lee observed that these concerns were shared by other members of the cohort, as they thought about the experience of Poly's African-American students, "whether in the area of examining expectations



Left: Upper School teacher Ann Diederich discusses her cohort work with consultant Enid Lee during a campus visit. Right: This year's cohort members included (front, left to right) Aquita Winslow, Laura Gershenhorn, Enid Lee, Ann Diederich; (middle, left to right) John Yen, Julia Davis, Charity Hume, Jenn Tolbert, Barbara Bohr, Robert Farrar; (back, left to right) Dave Yamaoka, Garret Tyau, Tess Damasco, and Alex Velasco.

regarding academic performance, differentiation in pedagogy, or facing the challenge of reading texts where questions of race and racism were evident.”

In the realm of pedagogy and instruction, a commitment to inclusion frequently resulted in curricular enrichment for all students. Having taught “To Kill A Mockingbird” to eighth-graders, Middle School English teacher Laura Gershenhorn shares: “A student questioned Atticus Finch — something along the lines of his character being ‘too perfect,’ inhuman in his efforts of fairness. Inspired by this student’s observations and supported by my work on Poly’s Diversity Committee, I offered this class an alternate perspective on the novel in the form of a New Yorker article by Malcolm Gladwell, ‘The Courthouse Ring.’ The article gives a critique of Atticus while drawing parallels between his fictional character and a real historical figure ... I see the need to push our study in order to maximize the number of perspectives and experiences shared within each text. My work with the committee has made me braver.”

In my own sophomore English II classes covering “Heart of Darkness,” the desire to include African perspective led to a study of the genocide in the Belgian Congo that Joseph Conrad describes in his novel. Although Conrad sought to expose the horror behind the European “civilizing” in the Congo, Nigerian novelist and critic Chinua Achebe

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identifies Conrad’s own racism in “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness.’” After reading Achebe’s article, Kelly G. ’17 commented, “Conrad’s notion of Africans’ not being equipped with the aptitude for language is something I had never noticed before, but now that I have, I see it everywhere.”

The cohort’s conversations also explored ways in which LGBT students and adults might gain a greater inclusion, visibility, and voice at Poly. Speaking of her English III

class, Upper School English Teacher Julia Davis writes: “I invited Dr. Adam Ackley, a professor, pastor, and LGBT advocate, to come talk with my class. Ackley is intersex and effectively told his story, mixing the history of science, psychology, and religion with his own personal history, openly and eloquently detailing for our students his attempt to conform to his assigned gender, the physical and psychological dangers of this repression, the discrimination he faced when he started transitioning, and the triumph of finally living true to himself at 46.” There are plans for Ackley to speak to students in an assembly next year; Davis hopes for interdisciplinary support of his visit in English, Biology, and Psychology so our community can gain a deeper understanding of the complex and multi-dimensional aspects of transgender identity.

Students with diverse learning styles make up a growing percentage of our population, and several members of the cohort sought ideas of how to better support them. The cohort identified subtle, invisible moments when students with learning differences are labeled and marginalized. Lower School Literacy

Coach Alex Velasco says, “My goal this year has been to work with the Lower School teachers to make sure that we constantly have differentiation on our minds as we design our curriculum and instruction.” She emphasized the need to have systems in the Lower School that support all students, regardless of their learning style, so their needs are met. To this end, cohort participants examined how assessments can include or exclude some of our students depending on learning profile.

To address those more visual and auditory learners, I changed one of the essay assignments in my English II class and asked students to create a video to express their ideas about Shakespeare. The use of media transformed our discussions, as students paired Shakespeare’s poetry with diverse, contemporary images and footage. They drew parallels to the Egyptian revolution, the conflict in Palestine, the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, and many other historical events as they expressed Shakespeare’s relevance to our own era. Visual and auditory learners could better understand Shakespeare when they set his words to music and used art and news photographs to convey their ideas. This type of assessment consolidates a variety of skills that

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can potentially help all our students gain confidence in core skills of communication.

As members of the cohort collaborated and exchanged ideas about assessment, a shift in thinking occurred. Many became more deliberate in finding multiple ways to encourage students to gain access to the unique talent that lies within them.

Cohort gatherings and individual meetings provided a space for sharing what it feels like to work at Poly in various organizational contexts. For some, it was an awakening about those who felt outside of the community.” This aspect of exclusion in the adult community was one of many insights shared by Director of Technology

John Yen ’89: “As someone who has had the opportunity to work with both teachers and staff, I have learned and observed marked cultural differences between

these groups of adults. There are divisive perspectives of personal value and contribution to the school and its culture and mission. Some feel valued, while others do not. What drives this? What causes this? It was like a social and cultural construct that seemed to be created from a philosophy that teaching and learning can only come from those within the ranks of faculty. It spoke to an invisible

*As part of his work on the cohort, Facilities Engineer Dave Yamoaka, along with members of the Operations Department, collaborated with Lower School science teacher Nishat Alikhan to offer a lesson in sustainability to students.*





*Upper School Librarian Aquita Winslow meets with Enid to discuss her cohort work, which focused on student speech and how it reflects the values of the school community.*

culture of employees that people “knew of,” but didn’t actually ‘know.’”

Efforts to find ways to dissolve institutional boundaries led to unexpected opportunities. Facilities Engineer Dave Yamaoka shares, “Much of the work on the school’s plant seems removed from the academic work of the school.” To counteract this, he reached out to Lower School Science teacher Nishat Alikhan and co-developed a sustainability lesson where students measured the efficiency of different types of light bulbs, researching their impact on both local and global environments.

In another example of inclusion, Operations Coordinator Barbara Bohr acknowledged that the cohort had helped form a bridge between the Operations staff and the academic community at Poly: “I felt like being a behind-the-scenes staff person on the cohort last year would be less meaningful than the voice of a teacher. After all, the business at hand is education. As I started to talk about my topic, teachers jumped right on board with this conversation.”

Bohr’s participation in the cohort contributed crucial perspective and influenced academic curriculum. Upper School teacher Ann Diederich commented on how Bohr’s ideas found a place in her classes: “The organic nature and flexibility of the cohort has enabled me to seamlessly integrate a variety of diversity and inclusion topics in my classroom. For instance, our cohort discussion of the trash issue on campus prompted me to bring this up in my AP Spanish Language class in our unit on urban challenges. Our students were able to see how our behaviors on

campus reflect and impact those in Los Angeles and around the globe. Before my work in the cohort, I sensed that my students did not understand how institutionalized injustice pertained to them. Now they are seeing more connections between Poly and the global communities we study.”

The cohort’s formation at Poly is one example of how an institution can create structures that generate positive momentum. Upper School Librarian Aquita Winslow explained, “I am more conscious of how I let my personal beliefs and fears stop me from doing or saying something about issues that I have the ability to influence or be a force of positive change. As a person of color, I find that my history and perspectives are different, and sometimes it’s that difference that is needed to help move the conversation along.”

Tolbert emphasized the need to ensure that the cohort’s conversations continue: “We all believe in equity and social justice, but it takes vigilance and effort to make sure that we are putting our mission and vision into action. I believe the cohort is a good model for creating change in schools. Whether it is focusing on social justice or implementing another new curricular initiative ... there is something powerful about coming together regularly as a group to share practice and exchange ideas ... Dr. Enid Lee has provided ongoing support, but even more importantly, she has helped us find the support, resource, and wisdom in one another.” ■



*Cohort members come together to discuss their work during a Skype session with Enid Lee.*