

Lessons Learned About Inclusion While Starting a New College

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Abstract

Starting a college from scratch presents a unique opportunity to think about how to build an inclusive learning environment from the beginning by selecting people and strategies that do not carry the weight of the traditional academic model and its prejudices and assumptions about who belongs and who does not. This article documents the lessons learned in the first two years of a new college and presents some next steps.

Keywords: alternative college; innovative; new college; startup college

Some Disclaimers

I want to start with an acknowledgment that I am a white woman from an upper middle class background who went to a traditional private liberal arts college designed for people like me and who has a Ph.D. So, as I grapple with the goal of gaining understanding in the realm of diversity, equity, and inclusion, I am relying on listening to other people's experiences and doing the best I can to understand them. I am not an expert in this, just someone who cares a lot and who is trying to build a different kind of college to address some big issues in higher education in a way that might nudge change in the entire system.

Starting a college from scratch—Wayfinding Academy—presents a unique opportunity to take all the things I saw in the higher education system that troubled me during my 15 years of working as a faculty member and to try to avoid those pitfalls. Mostly this looks like embedding a lot of intention into every decision, from the very tiny ones to the much bigger ones.

How to create a higher education experience that is inclusive and accessible is a thing I think a lot about, but only recently have I started digging deep into reading books, watching films, and going to trainings on the topic, and requesting that members of our staff and faculty do the same.

One of the deepest core values we have at Wayfinding Academy is that “education is an investment we all share” (<https://wayfindingacademy.org/creed/>), and that everybody should have access to it if it's a step that will help them to do what they want to do with their life. In all our systems and processes, from the moment we meet a prospective student through the moment they graduate, we have to be careful not to make assumptions about who belongs and who doesn't. We've tried to set up the Wayfinding experience so everybody is valued and respected for who they are and what they bring.

In the Beginning

Our students come from all over the country and have lots of experiences they're drawing from. It is important for all students to have someone they feel they can connect to as a mentor, who can understand them and what they're going through, and relate to what they've experienced in life. One of the things I tried to do from the beginning was bring in a team of faculty and staff who have a diversity of lived experiences.

Finding people who have a variety of lived experiences has been a struggle in the early years. When you start something from scratch, you rely a lot on your friends' network and people you've worked with before whose skills and capabilities you're already familiar with. As a white person from an upper middle class background, most of my immediate network was similar to me, so many people on our founding team looked a lot like me and had similar backgrounds. As a result, in the first year of operations we were predominantly white. In our planning meetings, we were having deep conversations about important and complicated issues related to equity and inclusion, but most people sitting in those conversations were white.

Probably because of the way we appeared to people looking in, the first cohort of students we enrolled were all also white. That was not our intention, and not all of the students who applied nor all the students invited were white, but all the students who ended up enrolling were. Even though we have backgrounds in equity, inclusion, and social justice, you couldn't necessarily see that or tell that just from looking at us.

One lesson I learned from this experience is that in addition to holding the values, you also have to look like what you believe. Both are necessary. We had the inclusivity and equity values in place from the very beginning, we talked about this a lot in the early days when founding Wayfinding Academy, and we built the curriculum around it, but to anybody outside looking in, we didn't look like that was what we valued.

The two-year program of study we offer is in Self and Society. The program title means that half of the courses the students take are about who they are as human beings, what they're passionate about, and what they care about. The other half is about society, what's going on in the world, and what the major issues are. We're helping students find the place where those two things come together, so they can figure out how to be of service to the world or their community. Social justice topics are embedded through just about everything we do in the coursework. When I went to hire the founding faculty to teach the first round of courses, I chose people intentionally who had a very strong background in and experience with social justice issues. Many of them were activists or scholars or researchers who had worked in this area for a very long time, so students who came to Wayfinding were surrounded by those conversations from the very beginning.

At the same time, once people came and spent time with us, were in our space, and had conversations with us, the feedback we got was that it felt like a welcoming and inclusive place. So, once we got someone in the building and into the conversation, we were able to break apart that initial perception that we might not be inclusive, or a place for people of diverse backgrounds.

After spending some time reflecting on this and noting these things, we made the decision to be more blatant about putting our values front and center. We did not change anything in terms our recruitment strategy for students or staff and faculty members—we still posted our openings in the same places and reached out to the same community organizations, but we started putting our Statement of Diversity and Justice on everything we put out publicly. It reads:

We believe that diverse backgrounds and perspectives are not simply ideal, but critical to the Wayfinding Academy, the movement to re-imagine higher education, and to the students we serve. We believe that justice is an active pursuit, not a passive stance. As such, we place special emphasis on candidates from underrepresented racial, ethnic, religious, gender association, sexual orientation, economic, (dis)ability, and cultural backgrounds which will increase the diversity of our organization and help us strive toward justice on those (and other) fronts.

Wayfinding Academy does not discriminate on the basis of race, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, gender expression, genetic information, religion, national origin, disability, previous military service or any other protected category in the admission of students, employment, access or treatment in its programs and activities or the administration of its educational and employment policies.

How it is Going Now

Our second year is looking a bit better. Of our six most recent hires, three were people of color and two were people with a disability. In our second cohort of students, 29% are students of color and 23% are students who identify as non-gender, non-binary or transgender (see Supplementary Figure 1). We now look like we match the values we have held from the beginning in a way that feels authentic, yet we still feel that we have a ways to go.

We get a lot of feedback now that, when people come to visit us, it feels like a place where they can truly be themselves and feel like they belong. I've heard that both from staff members and from students who are reflecting on places they've been before that did not feel that way. Most of our students—80% of them—have gone to a traditional higher education institution before they came to Wayfinding and one of the reasons they left those institutions was because they didn't feel like it was serving them and helping them get to their next steps. Put another way, it wasn't treating them like a whole human being with recognition of their talents and differences. They didn't feel they could just be themselves, they felt they had to fit into a box or some predetermined notion of what a “good” college student is like.

Another thing we do is make sure our pedagogy matches our values. We don't say that the only way to be a good Wayfinding student is to be able to write really good essays. Students are sometimes asked to write things, but often they are given the freedom to do a project in whatever format works the best for them. So, if writing is not their preferred or strongest mode of communicating their ideas, they can make a video, podcast, play, interpretive dance or

something else they come up with. We try not to make assumptions about what it looks like to be smart, or engaged, or able to demonstrate mastery of course material. In this way, we can treat each student as an individual and as a whole human being.

Finally, one of the things we try to do is embed these conversations everywhere. It is a thing we think about and talk about every day, not just at designated times. We start this with students during Orientation week where we give them a “scarf of inclusion” and let them know that if they ever feel excluded, or pick up on one of their cohort-mates being excluded, they should wear the scarf to remind us. We continue the conversation with students in the core courses and Guide Groups, and we weave it into our weekly crew meetings and quarterly Board meetings. We don’t try to steer clear of the hard conversations, we lean into them.

One thing I think about a lot these days is the motto of Dennis Littky, founder of The Met High School in Providence, Rhode Island, and later the Big Picture Learning Schools across the country. He has long said that he believes education should be “one student at a time.” He built his entire model on the concept of treating each student as an individual, meeting them where they're at, and helping them get from where they are now to where they're trying to be (Littky & Grabelle, 2004). Policies, procedures, and statements of nondiscrimination are foundational elements, which need to be in place, but they are not enough. It takes vigilance and intention to make sure there is a culture of paying attention to each individual student and helping them in their own individual journey. And this is probably the way to be as inclusive as possible as a higher education institution.

It is also important to be honest about the challenges that come with this approach. The first few months of our second year has brought some interesting challenges as a result of at least partially achieving our goal of having a more diverse community. We now have more voices at the table and more perspectives represented. This means we all have to learn to see the world from someone else's point of view at least a little bit of the time. This, of course, expands all of our knowledge and our ability to engage with the world in a way that matters. And when you get more diverse perspectives in those conversations, one of the things that comes with that territory is tension and conflict.

We had a few struggles early this year with making sure the conversations are taking place in a way that gives everybody the chance to voice how they feel, even if it's not in line with the majority view in the room. The first course students take with us is Understanding Our World which focuses on how humans have dealt with concept of “difference” over the past 500 years, specifically through the lens of colonialism. There are many complex topics that come up in those conversations, some of which are about the nature of human nature and whether we are inherently good or evil and much of the discussion is about class struggles and race tensions. When our first cohort of students took that class they didn't have a lot of diverse perspectives come up in their conversations because many of them come from similar backgrounds - there are different socioeconomic backgrounds represented in that cohort, but all the students are white and had been raised in the same dominant culture. For our second cohort, which is a more diverse group, when some of those topics came up in class, arguments would sometimes happen. So, lately, we have been having conversations as a community about how to have disagreements

respectfully and recognize and honor others' life experiences and how they influence their perspective.

Now What?

This leaves us with the obvious question: now what? My goal is to build on the foundation we have started and stretch us into the next level of thinking and acting on our values. A few specific things in the works are:

1. The formation of an equity team who participates in a series of workshops to build a common language and understanding, create some additional guidelines and policies for Wayfinding Academy, and puts a longer term strategic equity plan in place. We recently applied for a technical assistance grant to fund the formation of this team.
2. Creating a Civic Engagement and Social Justice track for Wayfinding students who want to focus more on these topics. This track would include taking workshops and trainings specific to these areas, doing internships with organizations focused on these realms, and creating a portfolio full of projects with this focus.
3. Hosting events specifically for communities of color in Portland. For example, when we do our student recruitment events this year, we will have some events that are specifically for prospective students of color and their families.

We still have a way to go to accomplish the goal of being a place that is diverse, treats people equitably, is inclusive of people of different backgrounds and experiences, but we have come a long way in the first two years. And we welcome the tensions and conflicts that will likely come up more regularly as a result of moving more towards that goal. But this is the purpose of higher education and part of the role of a learning community and it's probably essential to the future of our country - and perhaps the world - to be able to have these kinds of conversations with people who have different opinions and experiences than you and do it with compassion.

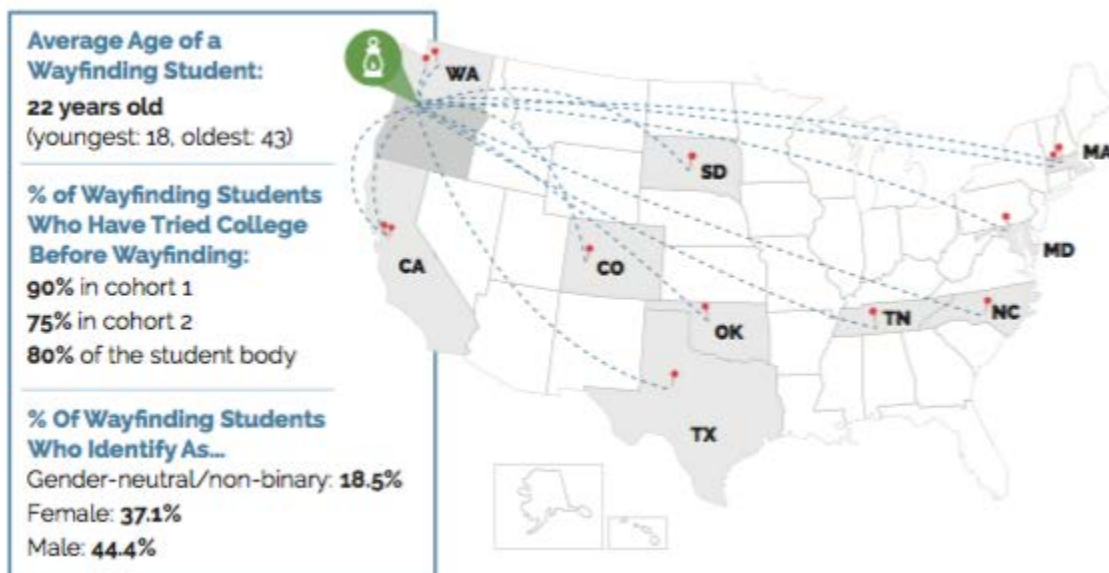


Figure 1: Selected demographics of Wayfinding Academy students.

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Author Information

Michelle Jones is doing her life's work, which is exhilarating and terrifying. During her 15 years teaching Leadership and Organizational Behavior courses in the traditional college system, she had a front row seat for what is broken about that system. About 3 years ago, she gathered a group of like minded folks around a vision of what a revolution in higher education could look like. After years of helping groups and non-profits organize for social impact as a volunteer (SuperThank, TEDxMtHood, World Domination Summit) Michelle started her legacy project and the Wayfinding Academy was born.

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About Wayfinding Academy

Wayfinding Academy is a new two-year college in Portland, OR at the heart of a movement to revolutionize higher education. We believe there's more than one way to do life. And one definition of success is not enough.

The two-year program is anchored by 9 core courses in communication, social change, teamwork, and leadership that will help students on any path. From there, they handcraft their own curriculum with the support of their own personal Guide.

Students get their hands dirty with real-world internships, mentorships, and Learn & Explore trips. All the while, they'll be documenting their experiences and learnings in a portfolio that they can carry with them far beyond college to show the world who they are and what they can do. There are no cookie-cutter tracks. We are humans to be cultivated, not objects to be sorted. It's education by odyssey, with qualified and dedicated Guides helping students choose each next step.

Wayfinding Academy has been approved by the Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission to grant Associates Degrees in Self and Society (yes, we're a real college).