

Towards Transformation: Faculty Engagement with DEI in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary landscape of higher education, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are increasingly vital in shaping inclusive, student-centered learning environments, even in such turbulent and uncertain times. This research examines data from San Jose State University School of Information's annual Diversity and Teaching Survey (2018–2022) to assess faculty approaches to DEI in online courses. It also explores how these practices align with broader movements toward decolonising pedagogies—those that critically examine and dismantle settler-colonial norms and values in education, creating space for epistemological diversity in the curriculum.

The research employs a mixed-methods approach, utilizing a concurrent, convergent design to collect and analyze both quantitative and qualitative data from part-time and full-time faculty. These instructors teach in the School's various online programs, including the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS), Master of Archives and Records Administration (MARA), Master of Informatics (INFM), and Bachelor of Information Science and Data Analytics (BISDA) degrees. The annual survey—developed and administered by the School of Information's Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility (IDEA) Committee—seeks to track the integration of DEI practices into teaching, identify faculty development needs, and support strategic planning aligned with institutional goals.

The foundational literature emphasizes that social responsibility, cultural competence, and critical reflection are core values of the LIS profession (Roberts & Noble, 2016; Poole et al., 2021). Yet, despite the profession's stated commitments to diversity, scholars argue that LIS education has not kept pace with its ideals, often reproducing systems of inequality. Roy (2015) and Singh (2020) note the persistent demographic homogeneity and institutional norms that exclude underrepresented voices. These critiques echo calls for decolonising LIS education—a movement that goes beyond representation to interrogate the structural and epistemological biases embedded in curricula and pedagogy, and to integrate Indigenous ways of knowing (see, e.g., Crilly 2024).

At San Jose State University's School of Information, DEI is operationalized through strategic planning and committee-driven initiatives. The IDEA Committee, comprising faculty, alumni, and student representatives, plays a crucial role in fostering dialogue, organizing events, mentoring Spectrum Scholars, and cultivating relationships within and beyond the university. The Committee's efforts are guided by the School's 2023–2028 Strategic Plan, which identifies two key DEI goals: (1) integrating diversity and inclusive excellence into the curriculum, and (2) supporting a diverse student body through targeted outreach and programming.

One of the most actionable outcomes of this commitment is the annual Diversity and Teaching Survey. Faculty report how they address dimensions of diversity in their courses, the sources of information they use, their teaching methods, and their affiliations with diversity-related organizations. These data inform decisions about faculty development, curricular revisions, and community partnerships. Over the course of five years, the survey collected responses for 234 courses, involving a total of 139 unique faculty participants. Participation increased over time, reaching a peak in 2022 with 60 courses represented. Courses in the Information Science (INFO) category consistently incorporated the most diversity-related content. The data also show strong faculty engagement with organizations like REFORMA and the American Indian Library Association—an encouraging sign of community involvement and professional development in DEI spaces.

Faculty addressed multiple dimensions of diversity in their courses, including culture, race/ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, disability, and language. Common teaching strategies included inclusive readings, case studies focusing on marginalized communities, collaborative group projects, and reflective writing assignments. However, more transformative approaches—those that align with decolonising pedagogy—were less systematically embedded. While DEI-focused instruction is becoming increasingly standard, decolonising pedagogy necessitates more profound structural shifts. This means moving beyond inclusion toward critical interrogation of whose knowledge counts and how power operates in the classroom. A decolonising framework invites LIS educators to center historically excluded epistemologies and interrogate systems of oppression.

Some survey participants reported using open pedagogy, community-based learning, and student-led discussions, which suggest an openness to decolonial practices. However, the data also indicate a need for more intentional support and training to move faculty beyond additive approaches—such as simply including diverse authors—toward truly transformative, anti-oppressive teaching. The findings suggest several opportunities for growth in integrating decolonising pedagogies into online LIS education, including offering workshops on decolonial theory, intersectionality, and anti-racist pedagogy, conducting curriculum audits to assess the representation of marginalized voices, encourage action research and practitioner inquiry among faculty to explore how their teaching practices can disrupt systemic inequities in LIS education, and broaden the scope of the Diversity and Teaching Survey to explicitly include questions about colonial frameworks, critical theory, and epistemic justice in course content.

The findings and recommendations from this research are critical not only for SJSU but also for other institutions seeking to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in higher education. By systematically documenting and analyzing the diversity strategies employed by

faculty in online programs, this study provides a replicable model for integrating Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion principles into academic curricula. It provides valuable insights into how educational institutions can build more inclusive learning environments by continuously adapting teaching practices to reflect the diverse backgrounds and experiences of their student populations. Overall, this research underscores the importance of DEI in the contemporary academic landscape and underscores the necessity for ongoing reflection, adaptation, and institutional commitment.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Online learning; Curriculum; Pedagogy; Social justice.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Diversity; Teaching; Curriculum; Inclusivity; Systemic inequities.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2025.2002>

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