



Student SEED: a social justice course

Informational Overview



Student SEED is a non-traditional, grass-roots developed social justice course which uses “the textbook of students’ lives” as the main teaching tool. Students explore and share their own individual experiences with race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and ability in order to learn about and understand the larger systems of privilege and oppression. The course facilitators strive to create a safe and respectful environment for students to reflect on and share their own experiences, learn from their peers’ experiences and build community while engaging in deep critical thinking around issues that are pervasive in our society and daily lives.

History and Purpose:

Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity (SEED) has been adapted from the national project by the same name, which was created and coordinated by Peggy McIntosh and Emily Style. The national project works with secondary education professional on building inclusive curriculum. We at the University of Wisconsin—Madison are the first to adapt the curriculum to the needs of faculty, staff and students in higher education.

Our aim in Student SEED is to create a place where students can share their lived experiences, learn from their peers' lives and build an inclusive community while engaging in deep critical thinking around issues crucial to our world today. This is a unique opportunity to meet in a challenging yet respectful environment for much needed (and facilitated) conversations on defining aspects of our identities. Students study the impact of each aspect of identity upon themselves and others within the communities in which they live, learn and work.

This course unpacks both the assets and liabilities involved of a diverse society where access to resources and privileges is uneven across people groups. Students explore, at a very personal level, how to enhance the assets and reduce the liabilities necessary to improve themselves and the world around them. In terms of pedagogy, there are aspects of the SEED course that clearly distinguishes the Student SEED “approach” from the handful of excellent academic courses already offered through several departments that teach about social justice. If a metaphor could be offered to describe the pedagogy of traditional academic courses, perhaps “banking” would be apropos: Students receive deposits of intellectual capital from the course instructor. It is then up to individual students to invest, spend, etc the acquired resources. In contrast, the pedagogical metaphor driving Student SEED is one of “harvesting” or “mining”. The unabashed focus of Student SEED is to examine issues of privilege and oppression not merely through academic textbooks, but from the rich textbooks of our individual lives. In other words, in contrast to the traditional pedagogy of academia, the SEED course is organized and based on the following pedagogical principles: 1) a cultivated balance of the emotional and cognitive aspects of learning; 2) a strategic and intentional support of the personal while critically framing the systemic; and 3) a conscious attention paid to social and communicative interactions within the classroom.

Course Overview:

SEED focuses on social justice in which students look at each aspect of their identities within the leadership and social justice frameworks of:

- Privilege and oppression
- Power and resistance
- Diversity and equity
- Diversity as an asset to create the future

Course Goals:

- To engage students in a process of examining and understanding their own identities and the identities of others in terms of ability, class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and religious-spiritual orientation
- To connect the above issues to and with the institutional systems and cycles of socialization they are embedded in
- To provide a challenging yet safe and open forum for addressing these issues and having critical discussion and dialogues around them

- To break down barriers between students who otherwise would not have come together and create a strong sense of community and support for each member of student SEED
- To build the leadership capacity needed to actively participate in the process of co-creating inclusive communities
- To build the leadership capacity needed to actively participate in the campus process of co-creating inclusive learning amongst peers at the University of Wisconsin-Madison
- To promote realization of Goal 6 of Plan 2008 “Foster institutional environments and course development that enhance learning and a respect for racial and ethnic diversity” and extending this to other areas of inequality as well

Lessons Learned:

Spring 2009 marks the thirteenth semester of Student SEED. Though a relatively young course, its effect on campus has been great. Students leave SEED with a working definition of social justice and a heightened awareness of the daily operations of privilege and oppression. Throughout the semester, students learn to unpack the sensitive issues surrounding diversity. Following SEED, participants carry this to their personal and academic lives as they pursue social justice work in many forms.

In addition to SEED’s affect on the individual and campus level, the course enhances UW-Madison’s formal plans to increase campus diversity. Specifically, SEED supports and enhances the content and structure of Goal 6: “Foster institutional environments and course development that enhance learning and a respect for racial and ethnic diversity.” Furthermore, SEED is directly aligned with the Wisconsin Idea. Since SEED teaches competency through a social justice framework, SEED students are apt to continue the journey they start in SEED and actively work towards creating a more just society. Thus, SEED cultivates a committed citizenry, students who will extend their knowledge of social justice to others in Wisconsin and throughout the country.

Past Student SEED participants noted the following:

- 90% “Agree somewhat” or more that Student SEED has had an *impact on how they do their work [after graduation]*.
- 84% “Agree somewhat” or more that Student SEED has had an *impact on their choice of degree/field/area of study*.
- 80% “Agree somewhat” or more that Student SEED has had an *impact on their choice of work*.
- 59% “Agree somewhat” or more that Student SEED has had an *impact on their choice of major/area of study*.

Past Student SEED participants wrote the following about achieving the course goals:

The instructors of the course were a definite asset and provided opportunities that allowed students to explore tough issues that would not have been an option otherwise. The educational experiences of students were enriched through dialogues around differences, inclusion and culture.

Student SEED was one of the most memorable and impactful classes that I attended at UW-Madison. When talking about my experiences at UW, outside of my direct field of study, I talk about Student SEED. This class creates a community in which I can let my guard down and talk about the elephant in the room.

Student SEED is achieving above and beyond [the course] goals. I learned so much from this class compared to many other classes throughout my 4 years.

Student SEED achieves the course goals better than any other class I have taken as an undergraduate or graduate student

SEED has done a great job at providing the space to feel safe and for others to be able to communicate openly.

Student SEED is one of the only programs on campus for students to discuss the affects of privilege, power, and oppression through the lens of their own lives.

Units Involved in Student SEED:

Department of Afro-American Studies
School of Business
Chadbourne Residential College
College of Engineering
Office for Equity & Diversity (Provost)
School of Education
College of Letters & Science
School of Medicine and Public Health (Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Veterinary)
Offices of the Dean of Students including the (former) Diversity Education Program and the Multicultural Student Center
University Health Services
Women's Studies Program

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