

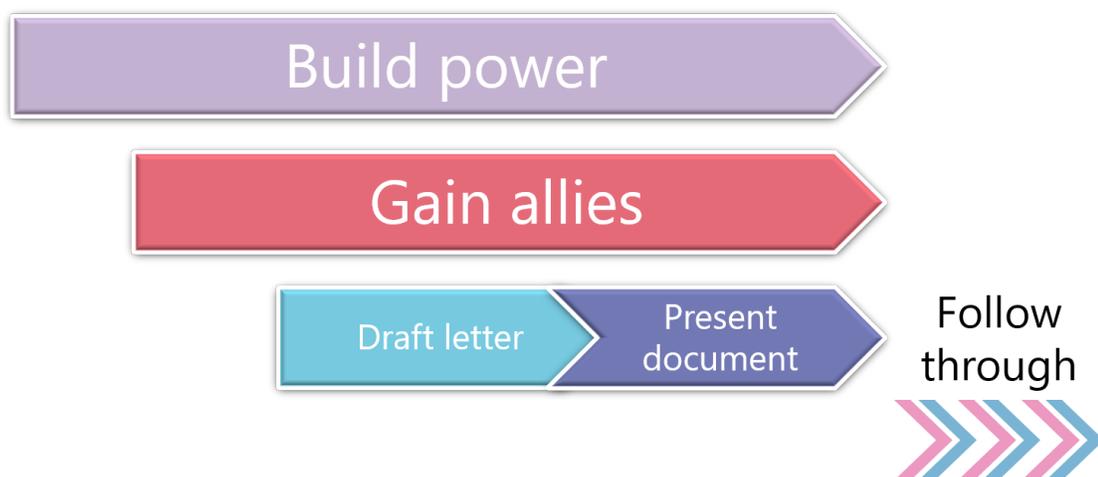


Introduction

As our graduate programs and scientific community grow more diverse, the slow rate of change in our academic institutions can create environments which do harm to and exclude minoritized and marginalized scientists. Engaging your academic community in a dialogue is a key first step to changing policy and culture to protect underrepresented students. If your student group would like to address a particular incident, such as sexual harassment or racist pedagogy, or if your group would like to address a variety of problems within your program, a departmental letter is one tested way to engage your department.

This toolkit provides tips and strategies to organize a group of students or community members, document concerns, determine your strategy, and draft a letter to affect action within the larger community. While the toolkit provides a range of strategies based on the experience of graduate students who have taken similar actions, it is important to recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Considering your shared goals, departmental context, and potential alternative interpretations of the letter's tone. We will refer to "action items" within this document, but this can be replaced with terms like demands, suggestions, or potential solutions depending on your group preferences.

Within the toolkit, you'll find strategies to gain peer support and introduce your concerns to faculty leadership, such as department chairs and academic deans. At the end of this document, we've also provided resources about evidence-based practices that promote equity and justice. We've divided the toolkit into six sections: Building Power, Gaining Allies, Drafting a Letter, Presenting the Letter, Following Through, and Resources. This process is not *sequential*, but additive, as seen in the diagram below.





BUILDING POWER

Making connections and garnering support for your initiatives early on in the process will be critical for ensuring efforts are representative of the larger student body and accountable to other efforts on campus. Making contact early and often will help generate buy-in for actions.

Contact the union. Our union of academic workers, UAW4121, is committed to ensuring everyone can work and study free from discrimination and marginalization. The union staff and leadership have extensive experience organizing social justice initiatives and supporting graduate students. Each department has access to \$50 a year for union organizing and recruitment, which can go towards your townhall. Look up the steward for your department on their [website](#) or email uaw4121@uaw4121.org.

Talk to fellow students and staff. Informal communication and connection are not to be discounted. Talking with labmates, classmates, and friends will help catalyze new ideas and broaden your perspective on the topic. One-on-one discussions will also help students feel engaged and increase the likelihood that they participate in future efforts.

Organize a student town hall. To be maximally effective, you'll want as many students on board at the beginning of the process as possible. Use events in the news or incidents at the university as a conversation starter to build toward a kick-off event. This can be organized at an existing event or independently.

Planning a town hall at an existing event

- (1) Contact the student organizers for your program's event to ask if you can use all or part of the time to discuss inclusion and diversity.
- (2) Draft an email to inform students of the subject matter. Example:
Dear students,
In lieu of normally scheduled programming, Friday's student society meeting will be a facilitated town hall to discuss department culture. This is an opportunity to address grievances and to organize to build a supportive, inclusive, and safe culture. Snacks and beverages will be provided, as usual.
- (3) Prepare an outline of topics to discuss; these could include: faculty diversity, harassment within department, microaggressions & racism within the curriculum, admissions criteria.



Planning an independent town hall

- (1) Identify a time & place to hold your event. SARJE has access to the room reservation system and can book a room for your town hall if you do not have access to a departmental room reservation system or would like to initially avoid their oversight.
- (2) Work with a core team of students to account for the following tasks: putting together an agenda, advertising the event through word of mouth or list-serves, getting snacks or other incentives for attendance.

Townhall best practices

- (1) Set up community norms at the start of the conversation to ensure that all voices are heard. Be sure to discuss how to give and receive feedback, as this town hall is an opportunity to *model* the culture of inclusion and respect that you are working toward.
 - (a) Be very clear about anonymity rules, stories may be told in this room that need to stay in the room, and there should not be gray area here.
- (2) Give attendees the opportunity to vent, within time constraints. People are moved to act by telling their own stories and hearing others. Use stories to drive discussion.
- (3) At the end of the meeting, summarize the main points and reiterate the follow-through action items to be sure that momentum is retained.
- (4) Remember, this does not have to be a one-time thing. Your first town hall may be all venting. Plan ahead to have follow-up sessions with foci such as: “developing solutions”, “drafting a letter” and “checking in on progress”.

GAINING ALLIES



Identify potential allies

- Identify *fellow students and trusted faculty* within or outside your department. Advisors to groups like SACNAS or NSBE and leaders in faculty advance are a great place to start.
- Talk to your *union steward* and determine the point person for the issue(s) around which your student group is organizing.
- Test the waters with your *department chair* or an *associate dean* by asking for a meeting. Use terminology like diversity and inclusion to start a conversation and see how much they've thought about these issues.
- Talk to *chief diversity officers* or *deans in other schools or colleges* who may not have power over your situation but have relationships with those that do.

Cultivate relationships with allies

Things to consider when reaching out to potential allies:

- How can allies support you?



- What is their priority?

DRAFTING A LETTER

Addressing your department as a united front, through a letter with which most of the students agree sends a powerful message to leadership.

Draft initial demands/actionable items.

- (1) Identify most pressing problems
 - (a) You want to have a good idea of what the most pressing problems are for marginalized groups in your community. Talking to a variety of other graduate students and peers within your community can be an extremely effective tool to get them involved, and gain an understanding of what the current climate is like for them so you can identify most pressing problems they are facing.
 - (b) Specific examples of common issues
 - (c) Lack of representation among graduate students or staff
 - (d) Harassment by mentors or others
 - (e) Lack of support for diversity initiatives
- (2) Provide useful background information on topics discussed
 - (a) Showing how policies and practices hurt the program, the students, and the faculty through an evidence-based manner may help convince the department or program to change.
 - (b) Citing sources will give your concerns and solutions credibility.
 - (i) What practices have peer-reviewed articles found hurt student outcomes? What policies help?
 - (ii) How do your concerns and solutions align with institutional goals, priorities, and values?
 - (c) Providing resources will help with the next steps by providing a framework for solutions or continuing the conversation.
- (3) Propose solutions or invite discussion
 - (a) Once you have identified the problems, try to identify ways to resolve these issues. Without actionable items, those in power may be less likely to take your letter seriously and come up with solutions of their own. Include a timeline of when these solutions need to be implemented.
 - (b) Specific examples:
 - (i) Encourage anti-racism and harassment training for the community
 - (ii) Student representation on a diversity committee
 - (iii) Remove the requirement for standardized tests



- (c) Alternatively, you could use this letter as the beginning of an ongoing discussion to change the culture of your department or program. If this is the direction you would like to go in, leave the door open for your allies in power to participate. Perhaps ask questions for the department to consider.

Get feedback on language, content, and tone. How you address your audience, frame the issues, and phrase your asks will affect how your letter is received and thus, play a big role in its impact and your results. Groups who may be good to contact for feedback include the union, your graduate student community, faculty and staff allies, and other groups on campus focused on promoting diversity and inclusion.

Getting input from both students and faculty will help to ensure you strike the tone that will be most effective in addressing your target audience in the context of your department. For example, if you have strong faculty and administrative allies, it may be most productive to take a tone of inviting the department to work with you to make changes. If instead administration and faculty are hostile toward such efforts, there may be a need for more strong language to show that you are serious about your demands.

In addition, other groups on campus have experience with these actions that can be very helpful. UAW4121, for example, is working toward a discrimination and marginalization-free work environment for all ASEs. The union staff and leadership have worked with students in various departments to help them develop effective letters, refine their language, and form realistic, achievable action items to bring to their departments.

Distribute the letter to the graduate student community. Generally, it is advised not to disseminate your letter through a listserv, as the listserv membership is not entirely known. If you want to send it out through email, consider using non-school email addresses for both sender and receiver, though this is likely logistically challenging. Non-school emails could first be collected via a form sent to the student listserv. Other options include sharing the letter in person by holding a space for such purposes at a time when students might be able to come by or holding a more formal meeting for discussion, such as a town hall. This approach has the added benefit of increasing in-person contact. Sharing it through a secured online student group, such as Slack, is also a good option, though it will require student participation in a new online channel that may pose some barriers to access.

Importantly, give students enough time to read the letter and provide feedback. This can be accomplished in person with edits on paper or via a shared Google doc. It may take a few rounds of editing before the letter is finalized and ensuring that voices are heard will increase your buy-in and the number of signatures you receive.



Gaining a majority of student signatures. It is important to show a united front for change to happen in your department. Incorporating feedback and concerns from your fellow graduate students will help you achieve this. When you distribute the finalized letter, ask for signatures if they agree. Be available for small meetings with students who have questions about the letter - these could be something as small as grabbing coffee to a more formal town hall-style meeting. Ask fellow students who are already engaged in the effort to talk to people they know about signing on to the letter. Personal connections make a huge difference in gaining support.

Organize town hall/meet with people in power

See building power

PRESENTING THE DOCUMENT



Prior to presenting your letter to your department, logistics must be considered. How you present your letter may have a huge impact on how it is received and how seriously the department takes it.

Sending the letter prior to presentation.

How far in advance? This is an important question with no definitive answer. Depending on your goals, you probably want to send it early enough that professors at the meeting have time to read and digest your letter and are able to come prepared to discuss it. However, you do not want your letter to be forgotten in some email sent well in advance. A week or two before the meeting may be enough time for most faculty to have read or skimmed through it, but this varies by department. Alternatively, you may want to use the meeting as an introduction to the letter and the discussion to follow. If this is the approach you want to take, sending the letter prior to the meeting may be unnecessary. Importantly, if you want this to be the beginning of the conversation, be sure to have plans for follow-up meetings in order for the discussion and progress to continue.

When and where to present the document.

Calling your own meeting or town hall.

Pros



Your letter will be the only item on the agenda
Students have control of the meeting

Cons

It can be difficult to organize a meeting with most of the department
Professors may feel threatened

Joining a staff/faculty meeting.

Pros

Faculty will attend and thus engage with the letter
Implies some faculty/leadership support

Cons

The letter may not be a priority for the meeting
The people in power will be in charge of the direction of the meeting

Who presents the document?

Students

Pros

Your letter will be portrayed in the way you want
Students have the best knowledge of the content and intent of the letter

Cons

Professors may give less weight to a student-led presentation
Professors may feel threatened

Ally in leadership

Pros

Other professors will likely take the letter seriously
Professors may be less resistant to the content of the letter

Cons

Students do not have control of how the letter is presented
Students are more “invisible”

FOLLOW-THROUGH

After presenting your letter to the department, it is of utmost importance that everyone follows through with the plan. Ensure that leadership does more than merely talk the talk.

- Options/contingency plan if things go south (during meeting and post-meeting)
 - Discuss plans with allies in power before the meeting so that everyone will know what to do if things go wrong.



- If one person in particular at the meeting is causing disruption of the discussion, try to get that person to leave. Your allies in power may be better able to help than other students.
- Sign a contract with the department detailing when things must occur and what steps will be taken if they do not.
- Maintain a relationship with UAW4121. They can provide resources and solidarity to ASEs who have experienced retaliation or
- Holding the department accountable
 - Actively seek out opportunities to assess department culture and/or provide a mechanism for holding advisors accountable for being good mentors
 - Hold regular meetings with faculty to continue discussions and remind them of the importance of your action items.
- Adhering to the timeline in the document
 - Ensure that there are ways to measure progress on letter outcomes
 - E.g. climate surveys, admission statistics,
- Passing the torch when you graduate
 - Cultivate a relationship with new and existing students. If new students don't know who you are, they will have less interest in continuing the work.
 - Sustain buy-in with incoming students each year by discussing what the issues within the department/program were and how they have improved since.
 - How has your work helped them and how will it continue to improve if they join you?
 - Find out what new or continued concerns students have.
 - How could these concerns be integrated into the proposed changes?
 - Now that your group has a relationship with the administration, are you able to advocate for new solutions?

RESOURCES



Please use our Resources Toolkit for a detailed set of places you can go to for help.

On the next page is a list of articles that you may find helpful when writing your letter.



Topic	Resource Name	Description
Diversity will help department/program	Groups of diverse problem solvers can outperform groups of high-ability problem solvers	One example article of how diverse groups outperform homogenous groups in problem solving tasks
	Evidence for a Collective Intelligence Factor in the Performance of Human Groups	The collective intelligence of a group is not correlated with average or maximal intelligence of individual members, but it is correlated with inclusivity, equality and the proportion of female members
	Framing discrimination: Effects of inclusion versus exclusion mind-sets on stereotypic judgments.	Including rather than excluding candidates leads to less stereotyping and greater effectiveness in selecting an appropriate candidate
Steps to improve outcomes	Without inclusion, diversity initiatives may not be enough	There is a disconnect between diversity initiatives and the experience of many URMs in academic settings
	Unseen Disadvantage: How American Universities' Focus on Independence Undermines the Academic Performance of First-Generation College Students	How a community-oriented culture can increase performance of first-generation college students (and how an independence-oriented culture can decrease performance)
	A Brief Social-Belonging Intervention Improves Academic and Health Outcomes of Minority Students	Increasing a sense of social-belonging among black and African-American students increased GPA and health outcomes 3 years later
Statistics about field or specific department	Doctorate recipients, by subfield of study and sex: 2015	The gender breakdown of doctoral recipients in specific fields nationwide
	U.S. citizen and permanent resident doctorate recipients, by major field of study, ethnicity, and race	The race and ethnicity of doctoral recipients in specific fields nationwide
	Graduate School Admissions Summary - Autumn 2017	Most recent breakdown of graduate student admissions at UW by program and by "Female," "Minority," and "International" admissions
	Admissions Statistics at UW	See above, but for previous years as well as overall graduate student admissions
	Graduate Degrees Granted - Summer 2016 through Spring 2017	Most recent breakdown of graduate degrees granted at UW by program - gender, minority, and international
	Degrees Granted Statistics at UW	See above, but for previous years as well as overall graduate degrees granted
Resources at UW	UW diversity Resources for students	List of resources students have at UW for support and aid
	UW diversity Resources for staff	List of resources faculty and staff have at UW for support and aid
	UW Staff diversity hiring toolkit	Toolkit to help in the recruiting, hiring, and retaining a diverse workplace
	UW Diversity Blueprint 2017-2021	Goals, priorities and suggestions from UW