

SEP GTA Toolkit

CU Denver Case Study



University of Colorado
Denver

Institutional Background and Department Context

CU Denver is located in downtown Denver on land historically taken from the Auraria neighborhood and is Colorado's only urban, public, research university and is the most racially diverse in the state (Niche 2023). Serving 11,000 students, with 58% of incoming first year undergraduate students identifying as students of color and 43% as underrepresented minorities, CU Denver is both AANAPISI and HSI, and is striving to become the first equity servicing institution by 2030. Understanding the need to support the diverse student body, CU Denver participated in the Student Experience Project with over 50 STEM faculty participating. While faculty engagement is crucial, many of the introductory laboratory sections at CU Denver are supported by GTAs and there is ample opportunity to engage GTAs in equitable learning environments. To engage GTAs and CU Denver chose to embed equitable training within an existing 2 credit Biology Pedagogy course as well as weekly laboratory meetings.

Training Design and Implementation

CU Denver leveraged existing infrastructure within the Department of Integrative Biology that aims to support graduate student teaching. All incoming GTAs in Biology are required to take a 2 credit Biology Pedagogy course which focuses on inclusive teaching, classroom management, and other critical skills for new GTAs; additionally, all GTAs in the department participate in weekly lab meetings with faculty to ensure consistency across multiple lab sections. The CU Denver team was able to incorporate training on SEP practices into these existing engagements, which allowed GTAs to dive deeper into equity and inclusion in the classroom. All participating students received course credit for the pedagogy course, plus a stipend, to recognize the unique nature of this training as a pilot and conduct evaluation activities.

Two lead GTAs worked with faculty leaders to create workshop content, lead segments of workshops, and facilitate group discussions.

A total of 15 GTAs participated in the workshops which were held between August and October, with opportunities for reflection and follow up during the weekly pedagogy course session and lab meetings. At the start of the term, GTAs were introduced practices that established a growth mindset environment in the classroom, reflected on why belonging matters, and were introduced to campus resources. In the second workshop GTAs were given tools to help them encourage connections and promote a sense of belonging within the classroom. In the third workshop, GTAs identified key assignments to use wise feedback statements on and practiced the use of their statements in a group setting with opportunity to receive feedback from their peers. The fourth workshop focused on fostering identity safety within the classroom. With these workshops concluding in October, the CU Denver team provided opportunities both within the Pedagogy course and the weekly lab meetings for GTAs to continue reflecting on new teaching practices and the feedback they received from undergraduates. In a final exercise at the end of the semester, GTAs collaborated with their lab coordinator and revised the syllabus for the course.

Lessons Learned

Engaging GTAs with SEP practices revealed four essential lessons and insights for future inclusive teaching practices. First, we found sustained engagement over the semester was crucial in helping GTAs improve teaching and form relationships. Group discussions with faculty and peers allowed for a space to address current or previous challenges and prompted solution making in an inclusive manner. Second, understanding the research base was essential for GTAs' success in implementing the practices and also sparked conversations about new norms needed in teaching and supporting diverse student populations. Third, being trained on more than individual identity was important to help GTAs connect to CU Denver's institutional identity and student population.

At CU Denver, we have a unique institutional identity and student population that is often different from what GTAs experienced at their undergraduate institutions. We found it important to devote time for GTAs to understand students' experiences and unique backgrounds, and how that impacts their learning e.g. many of our students work, are first-generation, etc. GTAs realized many of them were making assumptions about their students that were not true to reality. Lastly, SEP practices were seen as very tractable for GTA's which allowed them to positively impact their students and be more effective teachers. For example, wise feedback was a valuable framework for providing students with constructive, actionable advice and also grew GTAs' skills in giving feedback, which is a challenging area for new teachers. This practice also strengthened connections between GTAs and undergrads.

