

Faculty of Community Services Dimensions Chair, Year End Report 2020-21

Kathryn Church, PhD
School of Disability Studies

Background

From the start, Dimensions in FCS has received the full support of Associate Dean, Dr. Jennifer Martin. She has been a partner not just in the mechanics of launching the project but with sound advice about how to proceed, with recognizing opportunities and adding elements that I might otherwise have overlooked. Dr. Martin's first considerations for the Dimensions Chair appointment were BIPOC scholars in FCS. In a pattern that is part of our project data, senior faculty were already carrying heavy responsibilities; other good candidates are in early career development without tenure. I accepted the role after these discussions took place. I bring my history as a researcher and program director, as an ally of social justice movements and someone steeped in disability/deaf/mad/neurodiversity studies. That said, situating a racialized scholar in a lead role remains active as an issue going forward.

Faculty of Community Services is marked by the over-representation (and under-remuneration) of women and a collective sense of being under-valued in university relations. As core values Faculty-wide, equity, diversity, and inclusion bridge disciplinary and other kinds of differences among the 9 programs. They are evident in Dean and Associate Deans strategic priorities and funding streams, committees, events, and activities organized by each program, and at the individual level of faculty research and activism. Given this context, it was clear from the start that my work for Dimensions should recognize existing knowledges and "better practices" (Congress Report 2021) already embedded in faculty culture. The point was reinforced in my early meeting with the SRC committee (the group that adjudicates all internal research grants in FCS). Members expressed reservations about the sudden appearance of a Tri-Council project on EDI (Tri-Council itself identified as a terrain of struggle for FCS researchers) and its traditional framing around five "under-represented" groups.

Thus, a major task of this past year has been to craft an approach for Dimensions in FCS that was appropriate to the intellectual and political sensibilities of its research ecosystem. Discussions suggested the wisdom of a community development approach – appreciative and relational – slowly "building the brand" through consultation and conversation. Key considerations were:

- Respect for the distinctiveness of FCS programs and their various approaches to EDI work; variability and multiplicity are part of the “ecosystem”
- Recognize existing scholarship in EDI related to but also beyond the “underrepresented” groups, and expertise in developing/demonstrating appropriate practices
- Recognize the predominance of women as faculty, instructors, students, and staff; reflect the status of women as subordinate in university structures and processes within the broader context of intersectionality of identity/community locations
- Recognize the common commitment to respectful engagement with communities in research and social justice
- Recognize the scholarship of the School of Disability Studies, a rare undergraduate degree granting program in Canada, and a unique opportunity (beyond representation) for disability as a field of knowledge to be a tangible resource for the pilot

Surveys and Critical Conversations

I facilitated the roll-out of all the surveys that were designed by Dimensions Central: graduate and postdoctoral fellows. The major activity here was to alert Graduate Program Directors to their significance and need for response. I had good compliance from them in moving the survey through relevant channels.

Animating my approach, I designed and implemented a process for consultation with key leaders in FCS. Conducted primarily in the Fall, I had what I called “critical conversations” (45 - 60 minutes in length) with 25 people who are positioned to make systemic comments. They included all program directors, and anyone identified with a key research role in an FCS program (e.g. Chair of Urban Health in Nursing). I developed notes from each conversation and analyzed them for organizational significance. I searched out and read relevant academic journals/blogs that related to the emergent argument or pattern of issues including relevant Ryerson reports (historical and current) and examples of better practice from various programs.

Group presentations and discussion

In addition to one-to-one conversations, my process included group discussions. Over the academic year, I met with:

- FCS Scholarly/Research/Creative committee (initial consult in October 2020)
- Chairs/Deans/Directors (CDD) meeting
- Graduate Program Directors (January 2021 and June 2021); Urban Planning Graduate Student faculty mentors (January 2021)

- FCS Dean's Council (March 23, 2021)

Instead of a Town Hall (an event launched in other faculties), I organized the presentation of my Draft Findings to FCS attendees to a regular venue called *Positioning for Success* (February 2021). It provided an opportunity to consider whether Zoom captions were sufficient (and why not). The event included ASL interpretation and live captioning. Dimensions Advisory Board member Nancy Walton took notes from the event that are now part of the data.

During the academic year, Jennifer Martin brought me into several meetings where she thought a Dimensions presence would be fruitful. The most recent example is a meeting with Ryerson Human Resources (in the person of Zenab Pathan) as part of HR's university-wide consultation on resources needed to support research activities in each faculty.

Team

I responded somewhat differently than other faculties to the request for a FCS Dimensions team that would include graduate and undergraduate student representation. My caution stemmed, again, from early questions from others about how to be fair in constructing a team. As it emerged, my strategy was to create and circulate a job ad for a graduate student to create an Annotated Bibliography of relevant published works in FCS (i.e. foregrounding existing expertise). I hired Nursing Masters student Sarah Cree who is in progress (well along) with the completion of a bibliography and selected references.

As well, using funds from my stipend, I created a researcher/writer contract for doctoral candidate and CUPE instructor, Danielle Landry (York University phd candidate and Ryerson Disability Studies course instructor for *A History of Madness/Mad People's History*). From her triangulated stand point, Danielle's task (June/July 2021) is to write a "case study" of EDI issues in research using a Mad Studies lens. My intent here is to address EDI issues for people with mental histories using a systemic analysis of oppression rather than an individual analysis of "illness".

Committee meetings

I attended and participated in meetings of the university-wide Advisory Board and the Dimensions Chairs. I responded to requests and maintained email correspondence with members.

I provided regular updates and sought consultations with Associate Dean, Jennifer Martin.

I attended relevant events and conferences (e.g. Canadian Science Policy conference; *Ableism in Academia* book launch, Sarah Ahmed book launch through UofCalgary “conversations” series).

Conclusion

In June/July 2021, I will write a substantive report on all information gathered so far to include: relevant literature (scholarly and otherwise), highlights from critical conversations and any statistical data that is available; analysis of major issues and proposed action plan for circulation to volunteer “readers” in each of the FCS programs; the Mad Studies case study; the bibliography with selected references.

Facing a sabbatical (at an awkward point for Dimensions), I have been active with Jennifer Martin in reviewing options for the next Chair in FCS, in approaching Dr. Kathryn Underwood and in connecting Dr. Underwood with Dimensions Lead Dr. Art Blake.

During my sabbatical, I see myself continuing to attend the university-wide Advisory Board meetings (my other role). I would be interested, if relevant, in attending sessions in the future where the Chairs group assembles materials for and writes its Self-Study/Final Report.

Sincerely,


May 30, 2021