

Activities to Promote Discussions about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion among International Engineering Graduate Students

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Abstract

International engineering graduate students often report that they lack knowledge about racial identity in the US and that they feel left out of diversity conversations in higher education. Likewise, cultural differences with respect to attitudes towards and experiences of other minoritized groups, such as queer students, can also be challenging for international graduate students. For example, some international engineering graduate students at our university have expressed confusion when asked if they wished to share their personal pronouns. With financial support provided by a seed grant from our university, we organized the 2022 International Perspectives on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (iDEI) Summit. The 2022 iDEI Summit was a day-long discussion among international engineering graduate students about diversity, equity, and inclusion. The iDEI Summit yielded several challenge statements and associated recommendations that will assist our leadership in better supporting our international engineering graduate students and engaging them in efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. In this paper, we share detailed descriptions of the activities of the iDEI Summit so that others can readily implement them. Our goal is to help our colleagues by reducing the resources needed to coordinate similar events.

Introduction

Almost half (49%) of graduate students in the Cockrell School of Engineering (CSE) at The University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin) are international students, with tremendous variation among the CSE graduate programs, e.g., about 78% of graduate students in Petroleum Engineering are international whereas the percentage of international graduate students in Environmental and Water Resources Engineering is approximately 20%¹. International students often report that they lack knowledge about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) topics, such as racial identity, and are left out of DEI conversations in higher education². Likewise, cultural differences with respect to attitudes toward and experiences of other minoritized groups, such as queer students, can also be challenging for international graduate students. For example, some international graduate students in CSE have expressed confusion when asked if they wish to share their personal pronouns.

With financial support provided by an Actions that promote Community Transformation (ACT) seed grant from the UT Austin Office of the Provost and the CSE, we organized the 2022 International

Perspectives on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (iDEI) Summit. The 2022 iDEI Summit was a day-long discussion among international CSE graduate students about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Through the 2022 iDEI Summit, we sought to learn more about the unique challenges faced by international CSE graduate students and to develop actionable strategies for improved student support. In this paper, we share detailed descriptions of the activities of the iDEI Summit so that others can readily implement them to hold similar events at their own institutions.

2022 iDEI Summit

The 2022 International Perspectives on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (iDEI) Summit was a day-long discussion among international CSE graduate students. Throughout the event, students were prompted to discuss diversity, equity, and inclusion themes; were encouraged to identify issues that have a disparate impact on international students; and were invited to recommend actionable solutions. All discussions at the event were facilitated by a graduate student enrolled in another college in the university to encourage frank conversation.

Upon arrival to the iDEI Summit, participants were invited to help themselves to the breakfast buffet, complete a map activity at the check-in table, scan a QR code to complete a pre-event survey, and then complete the unique dish activity at their table. In the map activity (Appendix), participants place stickers on a map to indicate where they are from and where they would like to visit to help them start to learn about each other. In the unique dish activity (Appendix), participants use craft supplies to visualize a dish of food to help participants begin to learn about each other's cultures.

The iDEI Summit included a brief presentation by a keynote speaker. Prof. Manuel Rausch was requested to share his perspective as someone who had been an international student. Prof. Rausch sought to inspire the participants to use their own challenges and often difficult experiences as international students to build empathy for others whose challenges and difficult experiences may be invisible. Prof. Rausch shared his conviction that it is not "international versus national", but "us versus homogenization, inequity, and exclusion".

After the keynote talk, participants completed the pass the parcel activity in small groups. In pass the parcel (Appendix), participants take turns sharing their answers to prompts such as, "What is your favorite place on campus?" while receiving small gifts. After completing pass the parcel, the participants individually responded to a poll (delivered via slido) to collect initial thoughts about DEI. The prompts were, "How do the topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion make you feel?", "On a scale of 1-5, how included do you feel on diversity, equity, and inclusion conversations on campus?", and "What is a tip you would give to future international students?"

The next activity of the summit was story circles. In story circles (Appendix), small groups of participants share stories with each other in response to prompts such as, "Tell me a time when a professor/student made you feel like you didn't belong." After hearing each other's stories, the participants in each group identify themes for discussion with the full set of participants.

During the lunch break, participants were provided a Jenga game (Appendix) in which each block is associated with a question to prompt conversation. Some examples of the questions are, "Have you

had your name mispronounced?”, “Three words that describe my family are...”, and “If you were a color, what color would you be?”.

After lunch, participants were placed in groups to discuss in more depth themes that had emerged in the morning activities. For example, in the 2022 iDEI Summit, one theme that was identified was building relationships with domestic students. This discussion phase concluded with brief remarks by Prof. Christine Julien, the Associate Dean of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

Before transitioning into writing about summaries of discussions and associated recommendations, two more ice breaker activities were conducted. Participants played a variant of telephone (Appendix) in which two students who speak a language other than American English act as the ends of the chain. The other activity, silent sort (Appendix), emphasized writing as a collaborative process. In silent sort, participants are prompted to write on cards the words or short phrases that come to mind when they think about when they first came to the university.

After writing summaries of discussions and associated recommendations, participants engaged in a final activity, wall of appreciation. In wall of appreciation (Appendix), participants write short notes showing appreciation for each other. The summit concluded with a post-event survey.

Summary and Conclusions

In the 2022 iDEI Summit, we observed that barriers posed by cultural and language differences can be mitigated by activities that include non-verbal components (e.g., a craft project, a game like Jenga) and activities that celebrate cultural differences (e.g., sharing foods from different cultures). The Appendix contains details of the activities employed in the 2022 iDEI Summit so that others can adopt where needed for programs at their own institutions.

References

1. T. Berry and . E. Dominguez, "2021 Recruiting Diverse Students Presentation - Preliminary Fall Data," 2021. [Online]. Available: <https://utexas.app.box.com/v/RecruitingDiverseStudents>.
2. K. Fischer, "The Diversity Conversation Colleges Aren't Having," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 29 June 2020.

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Appendix

Ice Breaker Instructions for Facilitators and Students

This page is organized into a sheet for instructions for the instructor or the facilitator and then a sheet for the instructions for the students.

The activities are sorted in the order of:

- Mapping Exercise
- Create A Unique Dish
- Pass the Parcel
- Story Circles
- Jenga Questions
- Language Telephone
- Silent Sort
- Wall of Appreciation
- Questions for Jenga
- Questions for Pass the Parcel
- Survey Instructions and Questions for the Story Circle or Survey

Activity Instructions for Instructor
Mapping Exercise



Purpose of Exercise: This exercise aims to get students situated and generally learn about everyone at the event: where they are from and the place they would like to visit. It is best to perform this exercise for students as they enter the Summit because they can do it independently.

Description: On a map, place stickers on where you are from and where you would like to visit.

Estimated Time: 2 minutes for each participant

Procedure: Place a map on a board or the wall to allow students coming in to place a sticker on the map.

Materials

- Map (printed on board or paper; think about the labeling of country boundaries)
- Pins or stickers in two colors



Mapping Exercise

Directions

1. Put a **red sticker** on the map that shows where you are from.
2. Put a **blue sticker** where you would like to visit.



Example: I am from the **United States**, and I want to visit **Finland**.

Activity Instructions for Instructor
Create a Unique Dish



Purpose of Exercise: To share something about everyone's cultures through food.

Description: Everyone will create a dish within certain parameters (such as a dish with rice or your favorite childhood meal).

Estimated Time: 20 min

Procedure:

1. Set out supplies for decoration for the students.
2. Let them know the instructions: that they will create a dish that has to incorporate rice (or another form of direction).
3. After students are done with their dishes, they can place them in the back or share them with another student.
4. Display the dishes at the end so that everyone can share.

Materials

- Paper Plates
- Decorations (construction paper, puffballs, paper, i.e.)
- Scissors/glue

Create a Unique Dish

Directions

1. On the plate, create a unique dish that incorporates rice. Use any decorations on the table to create your dish.
2. Once you have finished designing your dish, share your dish with someone else.
3. Once everyone has completed their dish, we will collect all the dishes to display them!





Purpose of Exercise: To hand out some gifts to the students in a fun way.

Description: Pass a parcel of gifts around the group while playing music. When the music stops, someone unwraps a layer and keeps the gift. Continue until no more layers to the gift!

Estimated Time: 20 mins

Procedure:

- 1) Create the parcel by covering a gift with wrapping paper between each wrapping sheet, put in another smaller gift (ex. Sticker, chocolate), and a question on a small sheet of paper. A video on how to wrap is [here](#).
- 2) Make the group form a circle and pass around the parcel while music plays in the background.
- 3) When the music stops, whoever is holding the parcel can remove a layer of the parcel, and they keep the extra gift and answer the question inside.
- 4) This continues until the last wrapping paper is unwrapped, revealing the main gift.

Materials

- Main gift (better if it is easy to wrap up)
- Smaller gifts (stickers, chocolate)
- Wrapping paper (newspaper)
- Music

Pass the Parcel

Pass the parcel is a game where a parcel is passed around a group while music plays. Once the music stops, whoever is holding the parcel will unwrap one layer of the wrapping paper. Revealed will be a question and/or gift. The game continues until the last prize is unwrapped.

Directions:

1. When the music starts pass the package around.
2. When the music stops whoever is holding the package must uncover one layer – they will discover a question and a prize – answer the question and claim your prize.
3. The music will play again, and the parcel will continue to be passed around and get unwrapped after the music stops.
4. Once the final layer is unwrapped the game will end!



Purpose of Exercise: To create a list of values for the students that underline the issues they have with the topics of DEI. These values can be later used to understand the major arching themes.

Description: In a circle, people will share their stories to find similarities and lists of values.

Estimated Time: 30 minutes

Procedure

1. Make a small group of 6-10 people. Everyone will share a story tied to a prompt ex: something you saw that gave you a glimpse of what needs work to help this community's future live up to its promise.
2. In each Story Circle, once everyone has had a chance to share a story, the group reflects together on what was revealed.
3. When people return from their small groups to the group of the whole to share what they've experienced, leaders will have an opportunity to synthesize what folks have learned into a shared intention.
4. Try this: when you bring the Circles back together into a group of the whole, instead of a detailed report-back (e.g., "someone said this, then someone said that"), ask a representative from each Circle to add to a list of values or covenants for local cultural organizing, based on the stories they heard. Prompt them by asking something like this: "What's one lesson you learned from your Story Circle about what's essential to this community?"
 - a. This list can be done through having a large pad and attaching sticky notes to it from all the groups collaborative efforts.
5. When you have a substantial list of values/ covenants or things that need doing, the final step is buy-in. Try something that connects people, such as asking people to turn to someone else and share what they might like to do to act on all they'd learned at the Summit. Give each person a minute or so, then switch. Open the floor to a few minutes of sharing, inviting people to pop up and say what has them excited right now and what they'd be interested in doing.

Materials

- Groups of 4-5

Story Circles

Directions:

- 1) In your groups, everyone will share a story tied to multiple prompts.
- 2) Once everyone has time to share the group will reflect on everyone's stories.
- 3) Pick a representative who will report to the larger group summarize what was learned within your group and their experiences.
- 4) Each representative will write themes based on the stories they have heard on sticky notes that will be placed on a list along with the other group's themes.
 - a) What's one lesson you learned from your Story Circle about what's essential to this community?
- 5) Turn to someone else and then share what they might like to do to act on all they'd learned at the Summit
- 6) Now, it will be open for discussion with the larger group.



Purpose of Exercise: Ask students questions that are more relaxing and get to know each other.

Description: Play Jenga but when a block is pulled out each will contain a number that will then be connected to a list of questions that they then have to answer.

Estimated Time: 20 minutes

Procedure:

- 1) Set up a Jenga tower
 - a) Stack the blocks in sets of three until you have built a tower that is 18 blocks high. Each new layer of three parallel blocks should be rotated 90° along the horizontal axis from the last layer
 - b) Make sure the tower is sturdy
- 2) Let the other players gather around the tower and pull out the blocks
- 3) Each block will have a number attached to a question on a sheet of paper.
- 4) They will answer the question with each block pulled
- 5) The game ends when the tower topples over.
- 6) However, they can set up the tower and play again!

Materials

- Jenga with blocks numbered 1-54
- List of questions (54) numbered

Jenga Questions

Directions

- 1) Set up the Jenga tower
 - a) Stack the blocks in sets of three until you have built a tower that is 18 blocks high. Each new layer of three parallel blocks should be rotated 90° along the horizontal axis from the last layer
 - b) Make sure the tower is sturdy
- 2) Carefully take one block out from any level of the tower except the top. Look for the block that is the loosest, or the easiest to remove, or that will least disturb the stability of the tower.
 - a) You can push the block or pull the block.
- 3) The block will contain a number that matches a question on the sheet of paper. Read out the question and answer it. After, place the block back on top. And the next person will repeat the steps by pulling out a block.
- 4) Continue taking turns pulling out a block and answering the question.
- 5) The game ends once the tower falls. However, you can set it back up and play again!





Purpose of Exercise: Learn about other languages and cultures.

Description: Play telephone but in another language.

Estimated Time: 10 minutes

Procedure:

- 1) Choose two students that can speak the same language.
- 2) Have them stand on opposite sides with the rest of the students lining up between them.
- 3) The first student will come up with a saying or sentence in their preferred language and whisper it to the next student.
- 4) Each student will whisper it to the next one until it ends up to the last student who also speaks that same language.
- 5) They will try to guess what the sentence/saying was trying to say.
- 6) The first person will reveal what they actually said and explain its meaning.

Materials

- n/a; need two students who speak the same language although can also be done in English

Language Telephone

We need two people who speak the same language (other than English).

Directions

- 1) The first student will come up with a saying or sentence in their preferred language.
- 2) The rest of the students will line up behind them with the last person being the other student who can speak the same language as the first student.
- 3) The first person will whisper the saying to the second person in line and they will whisper to the third and so on until the last person reveals the sentence they last heard.
- 4) The first person will reveal what they initially had said and explain its meaning!



Purpose: The aim of this exercise is to get students to introduce themselves and to initiate collaborative working relationships immediately. It emphasizes writing as a collaborative process that requires input and feedback from others.

Description: Students exchange ideas with each other to complete an informal writing assignment.

Suggested Time: 20 minutes

Procedure:

- 1) Have 7 index cards and black markers for each participant
- 2) “In a few minutes, I am going to ask you to think about your ‘when you first arrived at UT Austin’ I want to try and understand the important steps you followed, the challenges, and the rewards. So, to start, I’ll ask you to close your eyes and relax by taking a few deep breaths. Put aside thoughts of other things going on outside this room. I want you to try and remember when you first felt and thought about UT or Austin. Think then about all the events that transpired since that day. Think about the events, the people, the challenges, and the moments of victory.”
- 3) Now, write down on each card your thoughts or reflections. They can be one word or short phrases. One idea per card. You can use as many cards as you wish – use at least 5. All thoughts are welcome.
- 4) Now, someone collects the cards of everyone in the group and mixes them up. Set each one on the table and have someone else read them aloud. Here, anyone can ask for clarification for a card. If the card owner wants to explain, they can share.
- 5) Next, the group will silently examine the cards and place them into groups. Anyone can move anyone’s cards. Subgroups can be formed. But silently sort the cards until none are leftover. If some do not have a clear group, you can set them aside for their own group.
- 6) Once all the cards are placed into groups. The group can speak again and begin naming the groups with a title card. This will create the final themes.
- 7) Form a story from these themes and arrange the cards in the order of the story.
- 8) Each group will go around and explain their story.

Materials

- Index cards (about 5 per student)
- Larger Index Cards
- Markers

Writing Activity Instructions: Silent Sort

- 1) Collect 5-7 index cards from the basket.
- 2) Now, on each index card, I will ask you to write one or two words about your thoughts or reflections on a specific prompt.
 - a) They can be one word or short phrases. One idea per card. You can use as many cards as you wish – use at least 5. All thoughts are welcome.
 - b) If some cards are not used, you can place them back into the pile.
- 3) Now, someone collects the cards of everyone in the group and mixes them up.
- 4) After mixing them, set each one on the table and have someone else read them aloud.
 - a) Here, anyone can ask for clarification for a card. If the card owner wants to explain, they can share.
- 5) Next, the group will silently examine the cards and place them into groups.
 - a) Anyone can move anyone's cards. Subgroups can be formed. But silently sort the cards until none are leftover. If some do not have a clear group, you can set them aside for their own group.
- 6) Once all the cards are placed into groups. The group can speak again and begin naming the groups with a title card. This will create the final themes.
- 7) Form a story from these themes and arrange the cards in the order of the story.
- 8) Each group will go around and explain the cards' story.



Purpose of Exercise: To end the event with an appreciation of each other.

Description: Everyone will have a sheet of paper in which other students can write kind words to them.

Estimated Time: 10 minutes

Procedure:

- 1) Have everyone write their name at the top of a sheet of paper.
- 2) Place the sheets of paper around so that each of the students can go around writing comments about their appreciation of each other for everyone.
- 3) At the end, the students can take back their sheets of paper home!

Materials

- Sheets of paper
- Pens

Wall of Appreciation
Directions:

1. Every person grabs a sheet of paper and writes their name on the top.
2. We will collect them and place them on a table in the back.
3. Then everyone will go around and write something on everyone's paper to show your appreciation for them during the event!



Activity Instructions for Instructor
Questions for Jenga



1. Which countries have you visited?
2. What languages can you speak?
3. What is a recent current event in another country?
4. What song do you recommend in another language other than English?
5. Have you had your name mispronounced?
6. Where were you born?
7. What is your go-to dance move?
8. What is a good TV Show or movie from another country?
9. Which country do you want to travel to in the next five years?
10. What are you most passionate about?
11. What was the highlight of your week?
12. What job did you want as a kid?
13. Before making a phone call, do you ever rehearse what you're going to say? Why?
14. What do you value most in a friendship?
15. Everyone answers - Do you have a weird talent?
16. Would you rather be the first person to explore a planet or be the inventor of a drug that cures a deadly disease?
17. Would you rather be fluent in all languages and never be able to travel or be able to travel anywhere for a year but never be able to learn a word of a different language?
18. Would you rather be the funniest person in the room or the most intelligent?
19. Would you rather read minds or accurately predict the future?
20. Would you rather be able to teleport anywhere or be able to read minds?
21. Would you rather be able to fly or talk to animals?
22. What is your definition of diversity? What does it mean to you?
23. What is your definition of inclusion? What does it mean to you?
24. Do you have a nickname?
25. What is the meaning or importance of your name?
26. Is there a story to how you got your name?
27. How have you managed experiences where there are differences in culture?
28. Describe a time that you felt really excited lately.
29. What was a challenge you faced this week?
30. Three words that describe my family are...
31. On weekends, I like to...
32. Someone I admire is...
33. I would like to learn how to...
34. What is your favorite memory from this school year so far?
35. What is your favorite movie?
36. Before making a phone call, do you ever rehearse what you're going to say? Why?
37. When was the last time you sang to yourself? To someone else?
38. What's the most beautiful place you've ever seen?
39. What smell brings back good memories for you?
40. What's your biggest fear and why?
41. Would you like to be famous? In what way?
42. If you could have any animal as a pet, which one would you pick?
43. What is your favorite word?
44. If you could make one food appear whenever you wanted, what food would it be?
45. If you had three wishes, what would you wish for?
46. If you were a color, what color would you be?
47. Would you rather spend all day studying one thing you love or do really easy homework for a subject you don't like?
48. Would you rather be able to talk to animals or control the weather?
49. If you were President for a day, what laws would you make?
50. How do you use what you are good at to help others?
51. What is one thing that you are really good at?
52. What unconventional topic do you wish you could learn as a subject in school?
53. If you could have an unusual superpower, what would it be?
54. What new skill would you like to learn?

Questions for Pass the Parcel

What most surprised you about
UT Austin?

If you could go back in time one
year, what advice would you give
yourself?

If there was a theme song for your
grad school experience so far,
what would it be?

Who is someone you admire at
UT Austin?

What do you consider your
greatest accomplishment in grad
school so far?

If UT Austin had a food mascot,
what would it be and why?

What is your favorite place on
campus?

What is the strangest experience
you have had at UT Austin so far?

Survey Exercise

Purpose of Exercise: A survey generated to spark conversation was taken during the event along with the information gathering pre and post event surveys.

Description This survey allowed everyone to see each other's responses and gave them a chance to explain their response to the larger group.

Estimated Time: 5 minutes

Procedure: After curating a list of survey questions, use a tool such as Slido to display the questions within the PowerPoint slides and use it to track and display to responses to the survey.

Questions for Story Circles and Survey

- How do the topics of diversity, equity, and inclusion make you feel?
- On a scale of 1 - 5, how included do you feel on diversity, equity, and inclusions conversations on campus?
- What is a tip you would give to future international students?
- Tell me a story when you felt you didn't belong at UT Austin
- Tell me about a time when you were glad you came to the US
- Tell me a time when a professor/student made you feel like you didn't belong
- Tell me about a person that had a big impact on your time at UT Austin
- Tell me about a place at the UT Austin campus that is important to you and why
- After you arrived in the US, what was the first story you told your family?
- What is the last thing you have told your family about UT Austin?
- Tell me about a situation that you felt was unfair during your experience at UT Austin.
- Tell me about your first class at UT Austin.