

UMD Department of Astronomy Committee on Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion (EDI) Activities and Accomplishments for 2019-2020

This report briefly summarizes activities of the EDI committee in the Department of Astronomy at the University of Maryland during the period September 2019 to August 2020. It does not include many other EDI activities and accomplishments conducted by the department, groups in the department (such as ACE, the Graduate Council, etc), or individuals in the department in which the EDI Committee was not involved.

Members of the the 2019-2020 EDI Committee:

Milena Crnogorevic (grad student), John Cullinan (staff), Barbara Hansborough (staff), Tess Jaffe (PTK faculty, Goddard), Ramsey Karim (grad student), Mike Kelley (PTK faculty), Eliza Kempton (TTK faculty), Robert Michell (PTK faculty, Goddard), Kris Laferriere (Undergrad), Laura Lenkic (grad student), Geoff Ryan (Postdoc fellow), Liz Tarantino (grad student), Teal (grad student), Stuart Vogel (TTK faculty), Angie Wroblewski (undergrad)

The committee met nearly biweekly during the academic year, and continued at nearly this pace for the summer.

Undergrads

Interaction room:

The interaction room in the Atlantic building for undergraduate majors has proven very popular and is often overcrowded and noisy. EDI recommended that the department find additional space, and suggested locations where this space might be found. Following this recommendation, the department converted the adjacent room from use for undergraduate TAs to additional interaction space, and moved the TAs to another office on the same floor.

ACE (Astronomy Community Engagement):

The EDI committee endorsed the metamorphosis of Astronomy Gentleladies Network (AGN), which focussed on mentoring undergraduate women, into [Astronomy Community Engagement \(ACE\)](#), a student-led group in the department with the goal of enabling community and access among intersecting groups in our astronomy undergraduate and graduate student populations. ACE was founded by EDI members Laura Lenkic (Community Organizer), Teal (Gender and Queer Minorities Advocate), and Ramsey Karim (Ethnic and Religious Minorities Advocate), as well as Sara Frederick (Community Liasion).

Graduate Students

GREs and Graduate Admissions:

The EDI committee had many discussions involving graduate admissions and the GREs. The EDI committee proposed that the Physics GRE at least be made optional (rather than required) as a consideration in graduate admissions. The faculty accepted this recommendation, and the

Physics GRE was made optional for inclusion in applications beginning with those submitted in Fall 2020. [Instructions for applications](#) make it clear that not including the Physics GRE will not count against a student if not submitted. The instructions also now state that good academic preparation is needed for success in graduate studies, and that this can be demonstrated in a number of ways which need not include the Physics GRE.

Also, in view of COVID-19 exacerbating inequities in GRE test preparation and access to good locations for test taking, EDI proposed that the department eliminate its requirement that the general GRE scores be included in an application, and that a statement be added to the admissions website that not including the general GRE scores would not count against an applicant. These [new guidelines were adopted and posted](#).

The admissions committee continued its use of the Skype interviews using the rubric and script developed by the EDI committee 5 years ago, which was adapted from the Fisk-Vanderbilt toolkit and attempts to measure non-cognitive attributes which correlate with success in PhD research. Our rubric and script was included as an example of good practice in the [AAS Task Force report on Inclusive Graduate Education](#). Also, the UMD Graduate School has [advertised holistic admissions practices and the EDI committee in astronomy](#), and based on input from Vogel and Harris modified the prompt for the common statement of purpose to include material relevant to holistic admissions.

Mental health survey

The EDI committee spent considerable time discussing the results of the [survey of graduate student mental health](#) supported by EDI. The paper describing the results was distributed to all tenure-track and professional-track faculty, and discussed in a faculty meeting. Additionally, the [following resources](#) were shared with faculty that might help students.

Department communications with PTK and off-campus research advisors of graduate students

The department Assistant Director (Oliva Dent) will maintain an e-mail list of PTK and off-campus research advisors of graduate students and endeavor to make sure they receive department communications relevant to advising of graduate students. This information will be collected from students in the google form that she regularly sends graduate students. This will supplement the department's expectation that both graduate students and official (e.g. professorial) advisors independently have responsibility to keep PTK and off-campus research advisors informed.

Faculty mentoring of graduate students

The EDI committee developed a [program in which faculty will begin mentoring graduate students](#). This follows the advice of the [AAS Task Force report on Inclusive Graduate Education](#), which recommends that students have mentors who are not their advisors. The department chair endorsed the program, which will begin in Fall 2020 with volunteer faculty

mentors. The program also calls for weekly “coffee” meetings between individual faculty and incoming graduate students as a group.

Near-peer mentoring of graduate students

EDI discussed near-peer mentoring of grad students, which is recommended by the AAS as being important for student success. The ACE members of the EDI committee agreed that ACE would think about this. ACE is planning a series of panel discussions for incoming students, and does not have the capacity to design and run a near-peer mentoring program.

Graduate Handbook

The rewrite of the grad handbook section on the second year project was completed and implemented into the department [Graduate Handbook](#) in spring 2020. EDI also discussed adding a research proposal component to the Graduate Handbook and that has also been implemented.

Time Away from Work

A document describing [guidelines for expectations for time away from work](#) for graduate students was completed and shared with the department in the fall of 2019.

Notable Colloquia and Seminar

[Professor Kimberly Griffin](#) (UMD School of Education) gave the opening department-wide colloquium in Fall 2019 on mentoring. A planned colloquium in Spring 2020 by [Professor Sharon Fries-Britt](#) on promoting the success of junior scientists from under-represented minority groups did not occur because Dr. Fries-Britt was unable to make any dates not blocked off by the faculty job search talks.

Notable [BANG! Seminars in Fall 2019](#) included a presentation by the Physics grad students who conducted the mental health survey of astronomy grad students, which the EDI committee had recommended that the department endorse. Dr. Carlton Green of the Office of Diversity and Inclusions presented tips on creating an inclusive classroom. Also, there were three seminars devoted to discussions of the Thirty Meter Telescope (TMT). The Statistical Research Center of AIP presented on the retention of women in astronomy, and there was a seminar reporting on the Inclusive Astronomy 2019 conference. The [BANG! Seminars in Spring 2020](#) included a couple of seminars related to mental health, a seminar from Dr. Jane Rigby on LGBTQ+ Inclusion in Astronomy. EDI recommended that the BANG! Seminar continue to be held virtually after campus was shut for COVID-19. Led by Milena Crnogorevic, the BANG! Committee organized weekly virtual check-in meetings for the department, with occasional virtual seminars. The check-in meetings continued weekly until mid-summer, when it was decided to take a break with less frequent meetings.

Miscellaneous

Anti-Racism statement:

EDI encouraged the department chair to make a statement on the killing of George Floyd, in support of our Black students and colleagues, and against the system of institutional racism. The department chair wrote such a statement, which remained as the leading item on the main department web page into August 2020, after which there will be a link to the statement on the main page and in the EDI sections of the department web pages.

Department culture

A subgroup of the EDI had meetings with the Office of Diversity and Inclusion with the aim of getting advice on how to make the culture in the department less white with the aim of making it more equitable.

Department Check-in:

EDI was concerned about making sure department members were doing ok during COVID-19 isolation. It recommended that the department check in on members. The department chair instructed supervisors and advisors to maintain good contact and regularly check in with people they work with, and encouraged all to keep tabs on others, and to let him know if anyone was struggling. Also, department members were reminded about the [Essential Resources page](#) maintained by EDI which includes links from the Counseling Center on how to help students or colleagues in distress

Slack workspace for department:

EDI recommended that the department start a Slack workspace to foster communications among department members and to provide a place where department members might be able to ask for help or ask for things needed, or offer help. Milena Crnogorevic set up the workspace, with many of the channels proving very popular.

Virtual lunches

Department lunch virtual meetings were proposed, and Laura Lenkic organized these. Attendance was relatively low, so these were discontinued.