

Envisioning a Better Academia: Principles and Commitments

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Overview

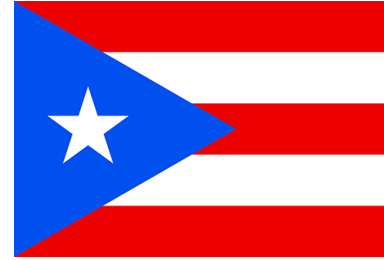
1. Where Am I Coming From?
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Where Am I Coming From?

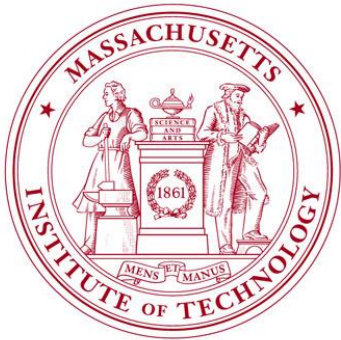
My Background



I am a first-generation American on my dad's side of the family; he was born in Sicily.



My mom was born in Brooklyn, but her parents were born in Puerto Rico.



I'm a first-generation college student (my mom completed high school and my dad completed 8th grade).



I'm gay and out (e.g., I'm a member of the LGBT+ Physicists Outlist).

There are lots of reasons why, statistically, I shouldn't be where I am right now (e.g., speaking at FFPERPS). OTOH, I'm male, cis, and able-bodied...

My (Higher) Education



Strong living group community (but we had to build it ourselves) and supportive physics peers.

Physics lab instructor: “The theme this semester is we give you enough rope to hang yourselves”



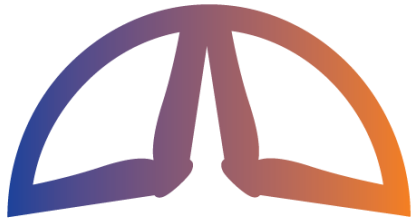
Terrible instructors, little community → Imposter “syndrome”

Growing identity as a teacher → Alienation from R1 culture

9.5 years, 3 advisors (1st: left without telling me; 2nd: “At the rate you're going, you'll never graduate”) → Depression, Anxiety

So why did I make it? → Therapy, Supportive family/friends, and...

The Compass Project



Founded in 2006 by three physics grad students at Berkeley to support underrepresented undergraduates.

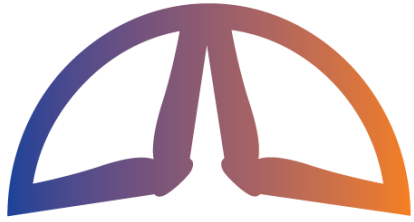
Programs

- Initially a summer program for incoming first years (I taught for the first one!)
- Expanded to include mentoring program, research lecture series, office hours, social events, semester-long courses, high school outreach,...

Impact on me

- Exposure to PER
- Community of people who cared about education and equity
- Space where I felt valued and where I could make an impact

The Compass Project



Founded in 2006 by three physics grad students at Berkeley to support underrepresented undergraduates.

Organization

- “Leaderless” organizational structure, Consensus-based decision-making
- Many, many values-level conversations
- Undergrad leadership since 2008 (when grad students became overwhelmed)

Impact on me

- Shaped the way I think about organizations and leadership
- Helped me recognize that the best way to “serve” a group is to work in partnership with them

Assumptions

The current culture of higher education, especially at research-intensive institutions, is toxic. It damages virtually everyone who interacts with it (especially traditionally marginalized folks).

While most people have positive intentions, they will nevertheless act to uphold the current system unless they learn to do otherwise.

Change is not going to come about by “disseminating” best practices or by decree from above. If you want to see change, you have to roll up your sleeves and do the hard work to make change happen.

True change can not be done *to* or *for* others. Instead, it must be done **in partnership with** others.

My Professional Commitments

Do work that will make the world a better place.

Work with communities of people who share my values.

Make sure that my research is driven by practice and my practice is driven by research.

Eliminate the distinctions between the actor (researcher, teacher, changer) and those who are “acted upon”.

Acknowledge the oppressive (sexist, racist, ablest,...) ways I behave, accept when others point them out, and do the hard work to unlearn them.



Departmental Action Teams

DAT Project Team (NSF IUUSE, 2016)



Joel Corbo
PI

Sarah Wise
Facilitator



Gina Quan
Postdoc/Facilitator



Mary Pilgrim
PI

Karen Falkenberg
Facilitator



Courtney Ngai
Postdoc/Facilitator



Dan Reinholz
PI



Andrea Beach
Evaluator



Jaclyn Rivard
Evaluator

What is a DAT?

A Departmental Action Team (DAT) is a departmentally-based working group of 6 to 8 faculty, staff, and/or students with two goals:

1. to **create change** around a broad-scale undergraduate education issue by shifting departmental structures and culture
2. to help DAT participants **become change agents** through developing facilitation and leadership skills

What is a DAT?

The DAT is supported by **external facilitators** and works over an **extended time** (~1 hour meetings every 2 weeks for 1-2 years).

Example DAT Foci

- **Curricular:** Aligning learning goals across the major, Assessing disciplinary skills across courses
- **Cultural:** Increasing equity/inclusion for women and URMIs, Improving undergrad community and support



Dan and I developed the DAT model at CU 4 years ago. NSF funded the IUSE project 2 years ago.

External Facilitation

Primary goal: Create an environment in which DATs are likely to achieve success, through (co-)facilitation by departmental “outsiders”



Core Principles

1. Students are partners.
2. Work focuses on achieving collective positive outcomes.
3. Data collection, analysis, and interpretation inform decision-making.
4. Collaboration between group members is fun, productive, and rewarding.
5. Continuous improvement is an upheld practice.
6. Work is guided by attention to diversity and inclusion.

These are both **design principles** and desired **cultural characteristics** of the DAT (and department).

Students are Partners

Students have unique expertise.

Students are deciders.

Students and faculty/staff share power.

Students see themselves as partners.

Students are an evolving, multifaceted population.

Students understand their own cultural backgrounds, experiences, histories

Students best situated to understand how a change will impact them

Participation in partnerships increases students' motivation, confidence, belonging,...

Institutional structures exclude students

Student/faculty partnerships require hard work to do ethically/thoughtfully

Violates culture of faculty-as-deciders

Students are Partners

Design Feature: Student members on DATs

- Highly encouraged, incentivized by stipends
- Active facilitation: revoicing/affirming student ideas, ensuring equitable distribution of work and decision-making

“I definitely feel much more empowered being part of this to know that even as an **undergrad** that my voice is represented in the department. That's huge. It makes me feel like I want to get up, I want to get off the couch, I want to do these activities, plan, organize, execute. And really, you know, maybe undergrads have a lot more energy, they haven't beaten it out of us yet, but I think we are kind of an untapped potential resource, that it's at least good to have open communication between all these levels.”

Collaboration is fun, productive, and rewarding

Everyone has access to authentic collaboration.
Common activities help build community.
Productive collaboration norms are implemented and upheld.

Groups that know how to have productive conversation, make decisions, and manage conflict do better work

People are more likely to engage in work when it meets their emotional needs (connection, enjoyment, being valued, making a difference)

Violates norms/expectations about how people “should” interact in academic settings
Violates culture of hyper-individualism

Collaboration is fun, productive, and rewarding

Design Feature: Explicit instruction on group process skills

- About 5 minutes at the beginning of each meeting, plus explicit modeling by the facilitators
- Variety of topics, often chosen for relevance to that meeting
 - Norms of Collaboration¹
 - Common Organizational Pitfalls (AKA, features of White Supremacy Culture²)
 - Models of Institutional Change³

¹ R. J. Garmston & B. M. Wellman. *The Adaptive School: A Sourcebook for Developing Collaborative Groups*. Christopher-Gordon, 2009.

² K. Jones & T. Okun. *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*. ChangeWork, 2001.

³ A. Kezar. *How Colleges Change: Understanding, Leading, and Enacting Change*. Routledge, 2013.

Defensiveness

Features

Criticism of those in power is viewed as offensive or rude

Defensive response to challenging ideas, which makes it difficult to raise challenges

Energy is spent working around defensive people

Antidotes

Understand the link between defensiveness and fear

Work on your own defensiveness

Give people credit for being able to handle critiques

Discuss how defensiveness impacts the mission

Work attends to diversity and inclusion

Oppression is systemic.
We all have a personal
responsibility to
mitigating oppression.

Consider the impacts of
decisions on
marginalized groups.

Recruit diverse
membership.

This is a matter of justice

Recognizes that “diversity” is not just a side issue that may or may not be relevant, but that issues of oppression are woven into everything we do

For people from dominant populations to recognize oppression, its systemic nature, and the role they play in it is incredibly difficult work

It is very easy to fool oneself into believing ones work aligns with this principle when it doesn't

Requires ongoing work (not one and done)

Work attends to diversity and inclusion

Design Feature: DATs include membership from multiple “levels”

- Faculty (TT and NTT), students (undergrad and grad), staff, postdocs,...

“[A]nother significant accomplishment is...that we have people from all different levels and parts of the department, I think that that is a real asset to the committee. And I feel like that validates what we are doing, right, like we're not ignoring people, some section of people who aren't speaking, and that makes all the actions more valuable.” (Postdoc)

...but really, this is a principle that we are not doing a great job of living up to in the design of DATs. We need to do better here.



The Access Network

The Access Network



A network of student-centered programs inspired by Compass in (mostly) physical science departments.

They embody five core principles:

1. foster supportive learning communities;
2. engage students in the process of doing authentic science;
3. help students develop professional skills (e.g. leadership, metacognitive, and reflective skills);
4. empower students to take ownership of their education; all to
5. increase diversity and equity in STEM.

Access Founders (NSF, 2015)



Joel Corbo



Anna Zaniewski



Angie Little



Gina Quan



Dimitri Dounas-Frazer



Chandra Turpen



Dan Reinholz

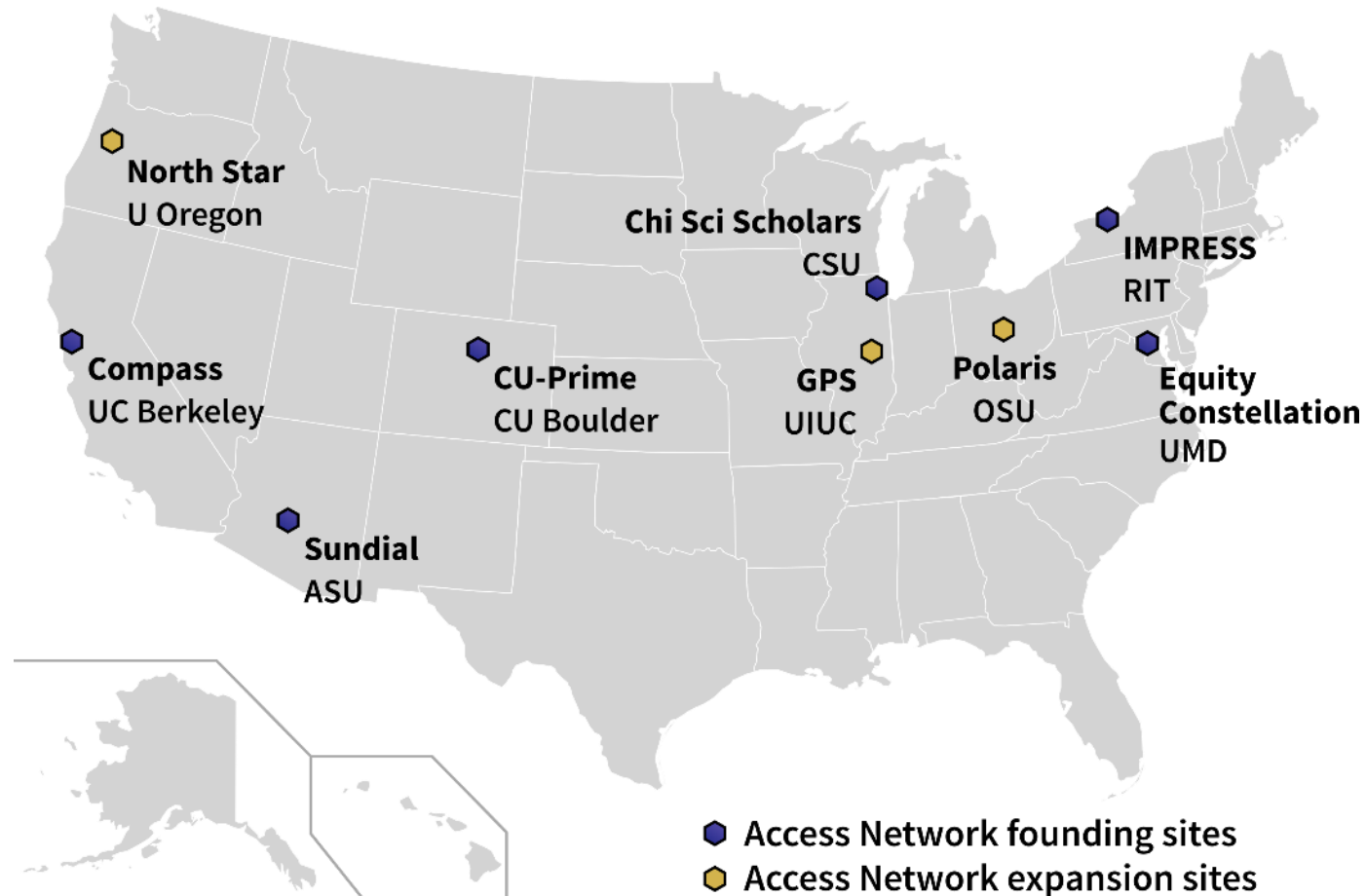


Scott Franklin



Corey Ptak

Access Sites



Access Assembly

3-day conference that brings together student-leaders from all the sites to build community, learn from each other, and improve their sites

40–60 attendees

Strong focus on equity/social justice as well as programmatic work

Planned by *Assembly Fellows*

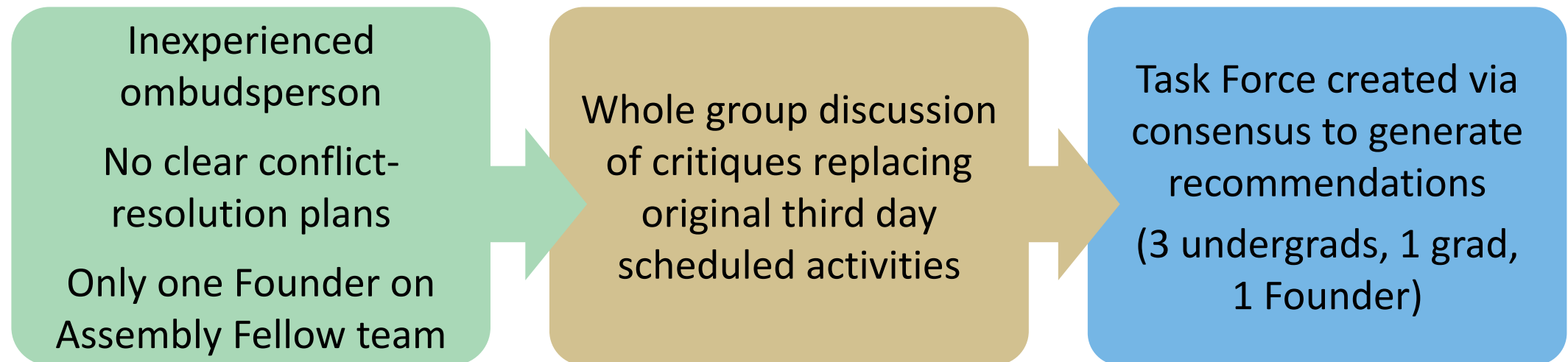
Access Assembly



Student Critiques at First Assembly

First Assembly ran into some problems:

- Some Assembly Fellows felt lack of ownership over Assembly planning process
- Local faculty/staff popping in and out of Assembly and violating norms made some students uncomfortable
- Interpretation of some parallel activities as for the “grown-ups” and the “kids”



Changes in Second Assembly

Recommendation: **clarify roles and constraints**

- Assembly Fellow roles, network structure, financial/NSF constraints made explicit during planning process
- Sought feedback from Assembly Fellows about their feelings of ownership during the planning process
- Everyone local to Assembly site had to commit to attending a minimum amount of the Assembly, including the opening session

Changes in Second Assembly

Recommendation: have a clear plan for **conflict resolution**

- Rather than a single ombudsperson, the second Assembly had a five-person ombuds-team
- Time was set aside after dinner on Days 1 and 2 for an explicit whole-group check-in on how the Assembly was going, led by the ombuds-team.

Recommendation: **co-mentoring of Assembly Fellows**

No major problems at subsequent Assemblies!

Lessons Learned

In working to center the needs of students within an organization, expect to make mistakes.

Addressing student concerns in a meaningful way requires well-designed processes for listening and responding, as individuals and as a group.

Students must have a role not just in participating in network activities, but also in critiquing and refining network-level structures.

Changing an organization in response to criticism can be emotionally draining to leaders. Expect that part of the work of leading is supporting your co-leaders (and yourself) in reckoning with one's own contribution to creating the situation that required the change.

Wrapping Up

My Professional Commitments

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My Charge to You

Take the time to articulate your professional commitments and the principles that you want to underlie your work.

Strive to enact them.

Find people to hold you accountable, and listen to them when they do.

When you (inevitably) fall short, don't be too hard on yourself. Learn from the experience, and keep moving forward.

Thanks!

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