

LEADERS IN Diversity and Inclusion

The CLA spearheads hires focused on improving diversity and fostering inclusion

In 2017, the College of Liberal Arts conducted a search designed to attract a group of educators committed to diversity and inclusion in their teaching, research and service. The college successfully hired seven assistant professors across several departments. The expertise they bring to the college includes multicultural psychology, diversity in the workplace, queer studies, mediated representations of race and gender, Middle Eastern history and ethnic American literature.

Hiring a cluster of new professors at once generally yields more applicants, and it demonstrates to potential candidates that the college is committed to diversity across the board.

“No single new hire or single department should have to carry the load of promoting diversity and inclusive teaching methods by themselves,” said Jennifer Teramoto Pedrotti, CLA associate dean for diversity and curriculum. “Bringing on more faculty who have those particular knowledge bases helps their individual departments, and it really helps our students to have the additional expertise of seven culturally competent teachers in the college.”

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— Roberta Wolfson

Right: English Professor Roberta Wolfson introduces diverse voices. **Far right:** Psychology Professor and diversity cluster hire Jay Bettergarcia meets with students about the SLO ACCEPTance Project, an LGBTQ+ mental health training program in San Luis Obispo County.

Pedrotti believes one of the most valuable assets the new professors bring to the university is knowledge of inclusive teaching strategies. Many of the new faculty members have been proactive in creating a more inclusive learning environment for students in the CLA.

Many have also used their expertise to diversify the course topics offered to students. English professor and cluster hire Roberta Wolfson, for example, has proposed and offered several new courses, including Asian American Literature and Refiguring Islam After 9/11. Many more course proposals are in the works, she said.

“There would be something seriously missing in any English class if we didn’t consider how certain voices throughout history have been silenced, or not given a space at the table to spread ideas, to spread messages,” Wolfson said.

Pedrotti and Wolfson both believe in the importance of not only creating an inclusive environment for historically underserved students but also exposing all students to new viewpoints.

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CENTER: JAKE GIUSTO, FAR RIGHT: KRISTA SMITH



never read a work of literature by, for example, an Asian-American author,” Wolfson said. “So we delve into thinking about why that is the case. At baseline it seems that our students should be exposed to a diversity of different literary voices.”

“I think students often want to be more culturally aware,” Pedrotti said. “But if nobody is providing that information, it might be hard for them to figure out where to find it. These teachers could help point them to the right place and help them learn about groups they may not totally relate to.”

CLA’s successful cluster hire served as a model for the university. This year, Cal Poly conducted a universitywide cluster search, similarly aimed at diversifying its teaching across colleges. Several faculty in the CLA are on the steering committee.

“Diversity is one of the top priorities for the university,” Pedrotti said. “I think inclusive teaching should be a top priority for everybody, because we strive for equity across different groups — in terms of the way they are able to access college, the way they’re able to learn once they get here and the kinds of opportunities they have. It’s definitely something the CLA is very invested in. We have made many changes, and we have established ourselves as leaders and a strong partner for others invested in this work across campus.”