

CDIPS final project O'Neil  
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## **Articulating Diversity, Equality, Inclusion and Social Justice (DEI for short) in Course Policy documents and assignment for Beginning Russian language.**

### **Part I: Executive Summary and References**

This project is an attempt to help students at the United States Naval Academy (USNA) understand and coherently express the need to reflect on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Social Justice (DEI) in all levels of Russian language. There are two issues I needed to articulate: 1) the need to serve all our students with their diverse backgrounds and 2) the need to broaden our idea of the what and where of “Russian,” especially since the Russian war in Ukraine that began on Feb. 24, 2022. I struggled to connect these two course goals -- perhaps unnecessarily, as each of them can be easily incorporated on its own. For my modest “project” I have drafted a course policy statement, a follow-up survey question in a google form, and included requirements to attend events outside of class that address DEI as well as Eurasia Forum guest lectures. (It is also high time to rename “Eurasia Forum,” but we haven’t gotten to that yet: that entity is outside the domain of my curriculum.)

### **References**

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- “Strategy: Navigating the Seven Seas.” Brigade-focused Group on Race and Equality (USNA). September 10, 2020. (Internal document.)
- DataUSA: United States Naval Academy <https://datausa.io/profile/university/united-states-naval-academy>

### **Part II IMPLEMENTATION:**

The United States Naval Academy (USNA) is a four-year public undergraduate institution. The student body (the “Brigade of Midshipmen”) consists of approximately 4,400 18-22 year-olds, with about 1,100 per class. The student body is overwhelmingly white male (from

2021): 67.3 % white, 11.8% Hispanic or Latinx, 9.93 % two or more races, 7.58 % Asian, 6.51 % Black (<https://datausa.io/profile/university/united-states-naval-academy>). Just over a quarter (28%) of the students are women (<https://www.usnews.com/best-colleges/united-states-naval-academy-2101/student-life>). USNA is very difficult to get into (9% acceptance rate in 2021), and it is primarily an engineering school: there is no major in Russian language and culture, although it is a popular minor. We have a new “Foreign Area Studies” major, which includes Russian, but it is too new to include in this discussion.

As a military academy, there is a superficial “uniformity” to the students: they have a demanding common core with little room for electives, they wear uniforms to class and observe military discipline outside of class (inside class, too, in theory); they have a large number of obligations outside the classroom that do not have to do with academics and thus limits their time to work on their courses in general, and their non-major courses (for example, Russian) in particular. The majority of our students are actively religious, primarily some branch of Christianity. They lean conservative politically. They believe -- correctly -- that their civilian professors are all liberals. They are wary of “too liberal” an agenda, but they listen and engage (students visiting from other US colleges often say there is “freer” discussion about politics here, particularly for students with conservative views).

Despite the overall whiteness and maleness (and “engineer-ness”?) of the student body, this is an extremely competitive and prestigious school (9% acceptance rate) that by law accepts students from every state, two factors that result in a diversity of sorts: a huge range of socio-economic backgrounds, a fair number of first-time college students, a fair number of students from families with military backgrounds. In other words, there is a regional diversity of cultures within the uniform racial profile.

As students, midshipmen tend to be results-focused, highly motivated by grades, and they expect to use what they learn upon graduation (they will be Navy or Marine Corps officers). They are good at memorizing and they love facts; they are less used to putting in the mental labor for reflection – but happy to do this when asked. They are practical: since Russian is not a major, they cannot prioritize it over the demands of their other classes.

We expected enrollment to change as a result of the war with Ukraine – there is great interest in Russia and the war, and a sense that this will affect their immediate future upon graduation. However, we have not seen changes in enrollment between this year and last: the numbers for FR101, four sections, is 65, similar to the past several years. In our Russian classes, we have some heritage learners from Russian-speaking homes, many heritage learners from other parts of the post-Soviet world. Many choose Russian for personal reasons.

As far as DEI issues, this was front and center of USNA “branding” discussions in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder and we can speak of it openly. No one expresses resistance to talking about race openly. However, with time the energy is flagging and all the institution has to show for it is some well-intentioned initiatives and much needed renaming of monuments and buildings. Percentage rates of BIPOC students and faculty remain

appallingly low.

From my own experience and discussions within the faculty working group on DEI, it is clear that midshipmen and many faculty members do not feel comfortable bringing up race where it doesn't seem to bear directly on course content. So, although I have been able to include much more content about race and diversity in the Russophone world, I have had a harder time bringing it back to what it means in the USA, or just to my students personally. It is not enough to teach about the diversity of the Russian-speaking world or about the history of Black people and other 'minorities' in those countries. We need to understand what will make our American BIPOC students interested in Russian and feel like learning it is worthwhile and relevant.

We have actually seen in the past 7-10 years a *decrease* in BIPOC students in our Russian classes. I believe it has to do with the fact that Russia is perceived as an unfriendly place for Americans of color. This is a part of the curriculum I plan to address directly going forward.

### Part III: Design

Instructional goals:

- 1) Students will be able to explain where outside of the Russian federation Russian language is used, and by whom, and why.
- 2) Students will be able to articulate in speech and writing why USNA DEI issues are relevant in our Russian class.

### Alignment

Performance Objectives	Learning Assessments	Strategies/Activities/Methods
Articulate what has changed in the Russian-speaking world since February 24, 2022	NOT rediscovering the wheel Using most of the same materials as we've been doing, students will be prompted to think beyond the grammar and other information involved, to consider <i>when</i> it was made and how it appears now.	pre-selected materials and links through collaboration with colleagues class discussion and small group follow up questions
Reflect on the meaning of diversity and race at USNA and how this may affect them as Russian students	A series of assignments and surveys. Summarize readings on race and responses to extra-curricular events, such as	Readings and websites, credit (pass/fail) assignments on attending lectures outside of class

	the USNA Diversity Conference	
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**Sample assignment, learning outcome 1:**

Students will be able to explain where outside of the Russian federation Russian language is used, and by whom, and why.

Our aim was not to “reinvent the wheel” by searching for new materials, but to keep what we used before and address what we see as the problems with them

We have used a very good and well-meaning website from Australia for supplemental cultural assignments: <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/russian-culture/russian-culture-family#russian-culture-family>

On closer inspection, they seem to be lumping many Slavic and former-Soviet groups under the label “Russian.” Still, it is useful for overviews of the regional cultural situation.

HW:

Family, assignment 1 (very early in the semester)

- 1) "Русская" культура: read about Russian families and summarize each section.

[by putting «русская» in quotation marks I'm reminding myself to discuss with them that the info in the website is not only Russian culture]

- 2) What is this website? Why do you think it was created?

[I plan to discuss the intention of the website, helping Australian communities understand immigrants that move to Australia. Their focus is on helping Australians learn tolerance.]

- 3) Did anything you read make a strong impression on you or surprise you?

[This is the part most like what I would have assigned in the past: “what is different about Russians”? Here I want them to articulate things that really stand out as differences between US and Russophone/post-Soviet cultures.]

1 week later:

Family, assignment 2

Using the Moscow Times article “Mothers and Daughters”

<https://mothersanddaughters.themoscowtimes.com/olessya-bondarenko/>

- 1) Scroll over the stories and write down all the places the women that are from that are NOT Moscow.
- 2) Read 2 of the stories and summarize them. How does it compare what you read last week, in Family Assignment 1? Jot down main points of agreement and divergence.

**Sample assignment, learning outcome 2:**

Students will be able to articulate in speech and writing why USNA DEI issues are relevant in our Russian class.

This isn't so much an assignment as language I included in the Course Policies handout I distribute with the syllabus on the first day of classes (A): I require them to answer a question about how they understand it on a general survey (google form, B), and will discuss their answers in class afterward. I plan to return to the topic a few more times – any time a student brings it up, of course, but also in conjunction to readings (see Terrell Jermaine Starr and Ramesh Nagarajah in References) and DEI events at the Academy during the semester.

**A) STATEMENT ON DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND EQUITY:**

This class (and all FR classes in future) reflect two distinct but related developments:

- 1) USNA after 2020: “Following the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, The USNA School of Humanities and Social Sciences has formed a working group on Race and Equality to identify ... the past and present experiences of racism and equality within the college.” The purpose of this group is, among other things, to “cultivate a culture of understanding and communication about race and equality for the Brigade,” in order to “improve the cohesiveness and performance of the Brigade.”

This applies to all classes, regardless of content: for FR101, in addition to learning about the Russian and Russophone language and cultures, midshipmen will be reflecting on themselves and how their background affects their development as both language learners and citizens of USNA.

FR101 students will be encouraged to attend the Diversity Conference on Oct. 4-5, lectures and events hosted by the Center for Regional Studies, and other Yardwide events. This will help create a community of language learners with both shared USNA experiences and academic interests.

- 2) Redefining “Russian Studies” after February 24, 2022. This development has been building for a while, particularly since 2014, but the field of specialists in Russian and Russian studies is now broadening to cover ground – linguistic, social, and cultural – beyond the centers of Moscow and Petersburg. The war in Ukraine has shed light on the need to present the diversity and complexity of the region, which extends far beyond the borders of the Russian Federation.

Students should expect to acknowledge and investigate stereotypes about “Russia” and “Russian” and, we hope, abandon them. Since even the enormous region of the Russian Federation, including Moscow and Petersburg, is not very well understood by the North American population, this may seem like a large task. However, it is essential for the changing world to get a better understanding of the many groups and nationalities we lump under the term “Russian.”

The two points above are related, as both involve engagement on the personal and social level within the classroom. Please contact me if you have any questions or concerns.

The class will be a SAFE place, where students are respectful to each other and we all agree to hear each other and address our concerns openly.

**B)** I followed this up in a question on the Day 1 survey on google forms.

Read page 4 of the Course Policies, **STATEMENT ON DIVERSITY, INCLUSION AND EQUITY**. Why is it in Russian class? Do you have any questions or comments?

A link to the whole survey is here. Any feedback on wording or appropriateness of the survey is welcome!

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Hj3FgIEZaIdZAKXofp6ghXRqlUZ4W\\_Nrag1Dupr1yJU/edit](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1Hj3FgIEZaIdZAKXofp6ghXRqlUZ4W_Nrag1Dupr1yJU/edit)

## **CONCLUSION:**

Getting all students to reflect upon and discuss diversity has been overwhelmingly positive so far. (Students being students, who knows what they really think?) But my classrooms, at least, seem *comfortable*, if not *safe*, as I would wish. I have carved room and time outside of class for confidential meetings as well.

There is still a lot of work to do. My work on our curriculum over the past year, as part of this program and as part of the DEI faculty working group at USNA has focused largely on race and gender, and I've focused more on Black students and women and their experience at USNA and in the Russian classes. There is a good deal of work to be done with LGBTQ, Asian, and Latinx /brown/ biracial students, whose needs and experiences may be very different. LGBTQ is a huge “work in progress” at USNA as an institution, and members of that population tend to either be totally engaged and “out” -- or totally silent. Latinx/Asian and other underrepresented groups are “fine” as far as USNA admin and in many cases their own words go. A new-ish event called “My USNA stories” (its third iteration will be this October) allows students to speak openly about DEI and other issues as they've experienced them at USNA. It's a start.

I am proud of the mentoring I do with heritage speakers whose families come from the post-Soviet world and international midshipmen at USNA. These students often feel marginalized in mainstream America and I advocate for them and include their special contributions whenever I

can. However, it is possible I am biased in favor of these students because of my background and interest in the regions they are from.

Last, the inclusion of these new assignments and the requirement for us to engage in them and discuss further, fosters an amount of English discussion that has traditionally been seen as detrimental to language acquisition. I see no way around this if the reflection is to be done in a meaningful way.