

Office of the President

Thursday, November 16, 2017

Dear Dr. Katz and Admissions Committee Members,

As President of Mars Hill University, I heartily endorse our institution's application to the Diversity, Civility, and Liberal Arts Institute. Mars Hill University is one of the most, perhaps the most, racially and socioeconomically diverse schools in Western NC. Nearly forty percent of our student body are persons of color, and fully fifty percent are first generation college students. We are proud of this diversity. Furthermore, we aspire to cultivate a campus environment that enriches our students' capacity for empathy, civil discourse, and collaboration within and between identity groups. The Diversity, Civility, and Liberal Arts Institute will inform our efforts toward that end.

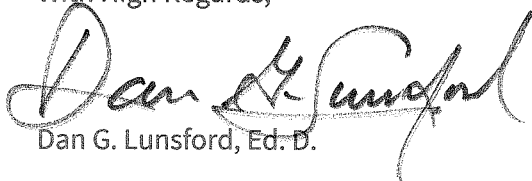
Our efforts to promote civility and inclusion of diversity fall under three broad categories: curricular, co-curricular, and administrative. Virginia Bower, Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center, and Elizabeth Whiting Pierce, Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Director of the Center for Ethics, will oversee curricular efforts. They will facilitate pedagogy workshops, develop new courses, and organize faculty reading around discussion groups around publications pertinent to this topic. They will also train other faculty persons to lead these programs in subsequent years, thereby providing young faculty persons opportunities to perform service toward tenure requirements, and thereby building faculty buy-in.

The co-curricular programs spelled out in this application fulfill several goals in MHU's 2017-2022 Strategic Plan. For example, an MHU Nudge Committee will provide a venue where students can "ask [administrators] questions, and receive public answers." For another example, retreats for students of color and first generation college students will address MHU's goal to "implement...programming for groups of students with the lowest retention rates." These programs will be housed in and funded by the Diversity and Multi-Cultural Affairs Office, directed by Alaysia Black Hackett, and/or the Center for Ethics. Ms. Hackett and Dr. Pierce will oversee regular assessment of these programs.

Lastly, MHU is approaching a rare window of opportunity for administrative changes. I will complete my 15-year tenure as president in June 2018. Our next president will begin her or his work with the university trustees in the fall of 2018, at the Trustees Retreat. Jim Brown, Assistant Vice President for Academic Administration, will lead a workshop at that retreat to share the insights of the Diversity, Civility, and Liberal Arts Institute with the new administration. He and Ms. Hackett will work with this team to develop MHU's long term plans to cultivate civility and inclusive diversity.

At the core of Mars Hill University's identity is a commitment to liberal arts education as a necessary support for democratic society. MHU exists to equip "ethical citizens...in an ever-changing world." The Diversity, Civility, and Liberal Arts Institute will enable MHU to fulfill that mission. Therefore, I give this application my enthusiastic support.

With High Regards,



Dan G. Lunsford, Ed.D.

Application to the Diversity, Civility, and Liberal Arts Institute

Mars Hill University

Biographies of MHU Team Members

Jim Brown, Assistant Vice President for Academic Administration:

Jim Brown, himself a first generation college student, has worked as an educator for over 28 years. Dr. Brown began his career as an elementary and middle school teacher. After 10 years in the classroom, he became a consultant for the A+ Schools Program, helping teachers integrate art production into their classroom activities. He went on to conduct doctoral research on children's aesthetic experiences. Since joining the faculty at MHU, Dr. Brown has served as a professor in the Teacher Education Department, former Chair of the Faculty, SACSCOC Liaison, and is currently the Assistant VP for Academic Affairs and Interim Dean of Adult and Graduate Studies. He played a critical role in the establishment of Safe Haven, a club for LGBT students. Finally, Dr. Brown is president of the Board of Directors for the Southern Appalachian Repertory Theater. Celebrating the arts and LGBT youth are key motivators in his life and work.

Alaysia Black Hackett, Director of Diversity and Multi-Cultural Affairs

Alaysia Black Hackett has been heavily involved in issues affecting persons of color in university settings for over 15 years. She has experience at a large state institution, small private institutions, and a historically Black institution. She is also active within her community, working with many organizations—Asheville Economic Summit Committee, Racial Justice Coalition, Stand Against Racism, Asheville YWCA, Stop the Violence Coalition, and others—to develop and offer policies that meet the needs of both marginalized constituents and community leaders. She is a proud member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc., and Alpha Kappa Delta, Inc.

Elizabeth Whiting Pierce, Assistant Professor of the Philosophy of Ethics and Director of the Center for Ethics

Elizabeth Whiting Pierce joined MHU's faculty in 2017. She has engaged—both academically and personally—issues of civility, conflict, and politics around environmental concerns for the last 15 years. Before graduate school, she worked as a community garden manager and associate pastor, navigating the sometimes diverging value systems of two groups of constituents: elderly, conservative Christians who owned the ground in which the garden grew and young, liberal, spiritual-but-not-religious volunteers who worked the ground in the garden grew. She went on to study environmental conflict in her doctoral dissertation, i.e. a thirty year water allocation dispute among Georgia, Florida, and Alabama. During that time, she served on a citizen advisory council to the North Georgia Metropolitan Water Planning District. Her work at MHU allows her to study and to teach groups to constructively work through conflicts of values and interests.

Virginia Bower, Associate Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center

Virginia Bower has taught in MHU's English Department for 23 years, teaching all levels of academic writing. She oversees the university writing program (Writing in the Disciplines), which includes training and supervising peer and Writing Center tutors while also working to create a campus culture of writing and thinking. Ms. Bower creates faculty development opportunities with program and grant funding supporting such activities as book discussions, campus conversations, and teaching-learning initiatives. Most recently, Virginia organized civil discourse training for students and faculty. In addition to teaching, her interests lie in creating opportunities for dialogue and collaboration among campus constituents and beyond.

Virginia has called Asheville, NC home for 24 years. During that time she has worked on county council election campaigns, hosted neighborhood Move On events, and held post-election neighborhood dialogues. She is an active member of Asheville's Unitarian Universalist congregation where she serves on the Peace Team and as pastoral visitor.

Application to the Diversity, Civility, and Liberal Arts Institute

Mars Hill University

Narrative Statement

(A) Specific challenges or opportunities related to diversity and civility that the Institute may help address;

Alaysia Black Hackett, Director of Diversity and Multi-Cultural Affairs at Mars Hill University, recounts a recent protest on campus: “Weeks after Philando Castile was murdered in July 2016, there was a police shooting of Keith Scott in Charlotte, NC. Charlotte is two hours from Mars Hill, NC. Charlotte is many students’ hometown, and they were directly affected by the protests that were happening there nightly. Students were hurt and felt a need to make a statement about police brutality toward black lives. Students came to my office around 11:30am to say they planned to hold a protest at 4pm. They were organizing themselves mostly through word of mouth, text, snapchats, etc. Key university administrators were not willing to allow students to hold the protest. Some threatened to file student conduct complaints. I worried my employment was in jeopardy, too, if I supported the students. However, I explained to the president that this protest *was* going to happen and that we needed to allow students to be heard. The president understood and thanked me for informing him. I worked with the new police chief, Michael Garrison, and Campus Security to ensure safety and flow. At 4pm, around 200 students protested in front of Blackwell Hall and on the highway directly in front of it. There were multi-racial groups and numerous student organizations. While the protest was non-violent, some community members drove by repeatedly with a noose hanging out of a truck. We started seeing more Confederate flags driving up and down as the students were marching.”

Despite the noose and Confederate flag-waving, this protest ended peacefully. However, this event revealed that Mars Hill University was not and is not prepared to deal with student protests. Much less are we prepared to treat protests as opportunities for dialogue, understanding, and perhaps even collaborative problem-solving regarding the sources of racial tension and racial injustice in US society. In applying to the Diversity, Civility, and Liberal Arts (DCLA) Institute, MHU hopes to remedy that problem.

Furthermore, we hope to learn to responsibly cultivate one of MHU’s greatest assets: exceptionally high racial and socioeconomic diversity. Nearly 40% of the student body are persons of color. Over 50% of our student body are first generation college students. Over 50% of the student body receive Pell Grants. This diversity requires careful stewardship; it presents MHU administration, faculty, staff, and students with opportunities to develop the capacity to communicate and collaborate across difference, a capacity that is critical to a civil, democratic society.

Unfortunately, MHU struggles to effectively support its students of color. This struggle is evident in 4- and 6-year graduation rates. MHU’s fall 2010 first year cohort showed 4-year

graduation rates of 12.8% for African Americans, 11.1% for Hispanics, and 25.5% for Whites. The same cohort showed 6-year graduation rates of 20.5% for African Americans, 11.1% for Hispanics, and 37.3% for Whites. The reasons for these lower graduation rates are complex. However, we strongly suspect one causal factor is demographics. MHU's faculty and staff are overwhelmingly white, with one Latina faculty person and three African American staff persons (not counting athletic coaches). These demographics may explain why our students, on average, are less confident than those in peer institutions that "[i]n general, my cultural community is valued on campus" (National Survey of Student Engagement, "NSSE 2017 Inclusiveness and Engagement with Diversity, Frequencies and Statistical Comparisons, Mars Hill University").

Clearly, MHU would benefit from hiring policies that equip search committees to recruit administration, faculty, and staff persons of color. That is a long term project. In the meantime, MHU administration, faculty, and staff need to be trained to more effectively engage and support this wide swath of our student body. The DCLA Institute can equip the MHU team to do just that (see section (C)).

Less well documented and hence less well understood are MHU's successes and failures supporting first generation college students and economically challenged students. One potential success in this regard is MHU's retention rates, which have risen slightly in the last two years. Credit for this improvement may be due to MHU's Center for Student Success. The Center provides a "safety net" to students in economic, personal, familial, medical or other kinds of crisis. The Center has expressed interest in training faculty to better support first generation and economically-disadvantaged students, and faculty seem quite interested. The DCLA Institute can inform the content of these faculty trainings.

The discussion above does not address the relationship between diversity and civility. Allow us do so here. We believe that effectively supporting students of color, first generation college students, and economically less well-off students is an intrinsically worthwhile goal that MHU should pursue. *That goal is also a necessary, but not a sufficient condition, to cultivating civility on our campus.* Students' civil engagement in matters of common concern depends upon four conditions. First, students must feel they have a stake in the common life of a community, whether that be the campus community or the local, state, or national populace. Second, students must have an opinion on a particular issue effecting that community. Third, students must have a forum in which to express their opinions. Fourth, students must have the communication skills to engage diverse members of their community in a constructive way and thereby effect their community's response to a particular issue. Effective support and inclusion of diverse students accomplishes only the first of those four conditions.

What about the other three conditions for civil engagement: opinion development, forums for deliberation, and constructive communication skills? We are confident that MHU course work equips students to develop informed opinions on many issues of common concern (condition #2). However, MHU lacks a student newspaper, and MHU does not provide copies of local or state newspapers to students. This means that whatever news students get is likely to come from national media outlets. Which is to say, students receive the most news about the political issues they have the least power to effect because they have little access to national decision making forums (condition #2 and #3). Student government does provide students a forum to discuss extra-curricular programs. However, SGA is not an appropriate forum in which

to address the administrative problems most troubling to our students: poor communication from the financial aid department, lack of transparency about the purpose of tuition increases, short notice regarding price hikes for parking permits, etc. Students lack an on-campus forum in which to address these concerns (condition #3). This needs to be remedied. In addition, students need more opportunities to actively engage in local and state politics (condition #3). Such participation would require significant diplomacy on the part of our students, as a strong “town vs. gown” dynamic exists between the Town of Mars Hill and Mars Hill University. On a final and hopeful note, we believe MHU does equip students to develop communication skills to constructively engage diverse members of their communities. MHU’s First Year Seminar II: Ethical Reasoning gives students tools and practice in discussing values and moral norms. As outlined below, MHU has hosted and plans to host various workshops in civil discourse (condition #4). But classes and workshops will do little good if students lack forums in which to practice their communication skills. The DCLA Institute can, we hope, enable MHU’s team to help our students find or create such forums.

(B) Previous or current efforts to support diversity and civility on campus;

In 2012, MHU hired its first Director of Diversity, Alaysia Black Hackett. Since that time, the Diversity and Multi-Cultural Affairs office has spearheaded a number of programs that engage students of color and LGBT students in MHU’s common life. These include: the University Intercultural Council (faculty and staff), the Black Student Association, the Native American Student Association, the Latinx Student Association, Safe Haven, MLK Jr. Commemorative Programs, diversity lecture series, seminars and workshops, Unity Candlelight Vigils, events to celebrate Black History Month, Native American History Month, Women’s History Month, Asian Pacific History Month, and Hispanic History Month. This office has also authored or co-authored numerous proposals for institutional reform. These include: a Bias Incident Reporting Program (BIRT), hiring policies to recruit persons of color, Men of Color mentoring program, an Arthur Vining Davis Foundation institutional planning grant.

Happily, efforts to engage diverse students are not limited to the Diversity Office. The Women and Gender Studies Department conducts regular events, such as the Human Libraries Project and the Dirty Laundry T-Shirts Day, and research such as a 2015 survey of the perceptions and experiences of LGBT students on campus. In 2016, in response to the survey, the Chaplain’s office trained 12 faculty in providing a “Safe Space” for LGBT students. Two years ago, the Writing Center hosted a discussion of Ta-Nehisi Coates’ *Between the World and Me*. The event attracted 50 students, faculty, staff, and area residents. This event was followed up by a discussion of MHU’s use of slave labor early in its history.

Efforts to equip students, faculty, staff and administration for civil engagement are similarly dispersed across the campus. This year, Virginia Bowers, an English professor, organized civil discourse workshops for faculty, staff, and students (workshops were conducted by the Asheville Mediation Center, funded by the Bringing Theory to Practice Grant). Next year, the Center for Ethics will facilitate several “Better Angels” workshops, which aim to depolarize political discourse, in preparation for the mid-term elections. The College Democrats and College Republicans frequently co-sponsor and co-organize lectures, commemorations, debates, etc.

These efforts demonstrate a cross-campus desire for inclusive excellence and civil engagement. However, that desire requires integration; it needs to shape MHU's curricular, co-curricular, and administrative structures in order to adequately prepare our students to engage the USA's increasingly fractious public life. The section below lays out our plan toward that end.

(C) A preliminary plan to apply the content of the Institute to the curriculum and co-curricular activities;

Curricular/Academic

One obvious way to support students' academic engagement with civility and inclusive diversity is to offer new courses that directly pertain to those subjects. The MHU team plans to generate 2-3 new courses from the content of the DCLA Institute. For instance, Elizabeth Whiting Pierce will develop a new junior-level, general education, philosophy course on Democratic Thought and Practice. Civility and diversity will naturally be central themes.

A more holistic way to support students' academic engagement with civility and inclusive diversity is to enrich faculty persons' pedagogical and theoretical toolkits. Virginia Bower and Elizabeth Whiting Pierce will provide several opportunities for such faculty development: Diversity and Civility Reading Groups; Diversity and Civility Pedagogy Workshops; and Diversity and Civility Advising Workshops. The impact of these activities will be assessed through several focus group interviews with students whose faculty did not participate (control group) and did participate (test group) in these activities.

Co-Curricular

Our co-curricular activities aim at two goals. Our first goal is to enable students of color and first generation college students to develop peer social networks. These networks, we believe, encourage identity formation, interpersonal support, and group agency. Programs aiming at that goal include off-campus retreats, alumni mentorship, and mini-grants students may use to bring to campus speakers, workshops or conferences related to their peer group's interests. These programs will be assessed through electronic feedback surveys. We will use small prizes (gift certificates to Starbucks or Amazon) to motivate participation in surveys.

Our second goal is to provide two forums wherein students may address concerns they have with university administration. Such forums are critical to students developing a sense of ownership in MHU and skills to engage in public life. The first forum, the MHU Nudge Committee, will satisfy the 2017-2022 Strategic Plan's goal to "offer opportunities for students to ask questions and receive public answers." The Nudge Committee—consisting of students, faculty and administrators—will gather student complaints and identify patterns within them. Then the committee will research and propose solutions for addressing those challenges. Its processes will be transparent and open to student participation throughout. The second forum will be a Student Advisory Committee to MHU's DCLA team. Students have reviewed and offered informal feedback to this document. The MHU team plans to continue and formalize students' participation in our implementation of insights from the DCLA Institute. The value of these forums will be assessed through focus group interviews of student, staff, and faculty participants in fall of 2019.

Administration

MHU's DCLA team has two reasons for adding "administration" as an area of attention. First, curricular and co-curricular efforts will bear long term fruit at MHU only if they enjoy the support of the trustees. Therefore, Jim Brown and Alaysia Black Hackett will host a workshop for the trustees and incoming president at the senior leadership retreat in fall of 2017. Dr. Brown and Ms. Hackett will share insights from the DCLA Institute for stewarding MHU's wealth of diversity, and they will seek the trustees' buy-in for campus engagement plans.

Our second reason for addressing administrative dynamics in this application is that institutional communication patterns—especially from the Office of Financial Aid—powerfully impact students' experiences at Mars Hill. Financial communications powerfully convey concern or apathy, respect or disregard to students. These interactions provide the backdrop for all classroom and co-curricular experiences. If we cannot practice civility in financial matters, students are unlikely to pay much attention to our curricular/academic and co-curricular efforts. Therefore, financial communications require our attention. The team will address this challenge through workshops with financial aid staff, and financial literacy workshops with students (to empower informed decision-making and self-advocacy). Alaysia Black Hackett and Jim Brown will conduct these workshops and assess their efficacy through surveys immediately following the workshops and six months later. (The MHU Nudge Committee expects to address financial communications challenges in a more structural way.)

(D) the relevant experience and campus roles of the proposed team members.

Jim Brown, Assistant Vice President for Academic Administration:

Dr. Brown brings to MHU's DCLA team 18 years of experience as a Professor of Education, a former chair of the faculty at MHU, a former Dean of Academic Administration, and current Assistant VP for Academic Affairs and Interim Dean of Adult and Graduate Studies. He has access to the senior leadership at the university and will help the team secure the funding and support it needs to carry out any plans developed.

Alaysia Black Hackett, Director of Diversity and Multi-Cultural Affairs

Ms. Hackett holds a Bachelors of Science in Sociology with a concentration in Race, Ethnicity, and Gender Relations and a Masters of Public Affairs. She is currently pursuing an Executive Juris Doctor degree from Concord Law School, Purdue University. These degrees equip her to analyze the impacts of MHU's policies and structures on various groups of students. Furthermore, Ms. Hackett possesses a personal capacity to connect with students and staff. During her 5-year tenure at MHU, she has developed healthy rapport with various minority groups on MHU's campus: African American students, Native American Students, Asian American students, Latinx students, and LGBT students. As a sought out speaker and educator, she is able to explain the dynamics of institutional racism and socio-economic oppression to diverse audiences and to engage them in the work of equality. She will bring these technical and communication skills to various workshops and assessment procedures discussed above. These activities fit naturally within Ms. Hackett's existing job description.

Elizabeth Whiting Pierce, Assistant Professor of the Philosophy of Ethics and Director of the Center for Ethics

Dr. Pierce directs MHU's newly founded Center for Ethics, whose mission is "cultivating moral vision and equipping institutionally savvy leaders and followers." The new Center has funding and programmatic latitude to house the academic and co-curricular programs proposed above. Also, Dr. Pierce holds significant experience in program development, administration and assessment, experience gained as Project Manager of the CREATE Program at Emory University's Center for Ethics. Dr. Pierce is also a registered mediator with the Georgia Supreme Court, a role that has prepared her to engage the challenging issues that prompt campus protests.

Virginia Bower, Associate Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center

As director of MHU's university writing program, Ms. Bower has provided faculty and staff many professional development opportunities (e.g., annual assessment, readings/discussions, luncheons, writing workshops) while also providing training for students in leadership positions (tutor/writing fellow training; civil discourse training organizing). In the fall of 2016, Ms. Bower was awarded the Hoffman Fellowship, the primary focus of which "is to strengthen teaching and learning within the university and its community." In spring 2017, she was awarded a Bringing Theory to Practice grant that supported campus conversations and activities around "the greater benefits of higher education."

The activities and events Ms. Bower has organized continue to have an impact on MHU's campus. Several initiatives this semester—a wellness program, civil discourse trainings, a new action plan for creating a more accurate historical narrative of the university's exploitation of enslaved African Americans—can be directly linked to projects that she initiated in semesters past.

