

TITLE: Student Assistants: A Force for Inclusion and Sustainability.

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Abstract

The UN sustainable development goals explicitly address inclusivity and equity in education (goal 4) and promoting accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (goal 16). The presence of diverse and inclusive perspectives is in itself an asset for sustainable development. Inclusive educational institutions provide equitable learning environments, and opportunities to succeed.

Recent studies within a Swiss higher-learning institution, concur with several international studies, showing that classrooms are inhospitable, and students encounter discrimination and harassment in these spaces. Experiencing, or even witnessing, such events leads to declines in academic performance, and possibly, student attrition; especially for minoritized students. Since multiple studies have shown that student assistants (SAs) have a positive influence on students' academic outcomes, this study explores their perceptions and potential to build inclusive classrooms.

This mixed-methods study has data from 277 SAs teaching in first year courses, and from 3971 students taking those classes. SAs responded to questions about how 'important' specific inclusion-related actions are in their role as assistants, and also how 'ready and able' they felt to enact them. They also responded to open ended prompts about their teaching strengths, areas that need improvement, obstacles, and ideas about their role in reducing incidents of discrimination or harassment.

SA responses indicated that they both saw inclusion as part of their role, and felt ready and able to enact inclusive practices. Additionally, SAs demonstrated their commitment by both taking an institutionally recommended respect training (> 3/4th of SAs) and taking specific actions that increased inclusion in their classrooms (> half of SAs). This is also shown by the fact that students overwhelmingly reported respectful interactions with their SAs. When mapped onto Dewsbury's (2020) framework, ideas from SAs open ended responses showed high coherence with inclusive teaching competencies. Building a positive classroom climate dominated SAs' ideas about decreasing discrimination.

Our data supports our hypothesis that student teaching assistants can be a powerful force to help build inclusive and sustainable classrooms. Since SAs consider inclusivity to be a part of their role, initiatives that encourage them to contribute more to inclusion take advantage of an already open door rather than knocking on closed doors. Additionally, we need to focus on designing explicit and targeted trainings, supporting students who experience discrimination and harassment, and improving transparency and accountability in our institutions.