Language of Diversity and Social Justice

This resource is intended to support authentic and effective communication by developing a shared understanding of terms and concepts.

Diversity: Differences between social identity groups based on social categories such as race, gender, sexuality, class, and much more. These differences are reflected in a group’s tradition, language, style of dress, cultural practices, religious beliefs and rituals, and these are usually termed “differences” from some norm that is privileged.

Multicultural Competence: The awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to work in meaningful, relevant, and productive ways with others who are culturally different from self or culturally similar to self. Competence is a journey, not necessarily a destination.

Social Justice: Grounded in a commitment to undo systems of oppression and privilege, to serve as allies to groups targeted by social oppression, and to center the experiences of those who experience the most marginalization in the current system.

Prejudice: A judgment or opinion that is formed on insufficient grounds before facts are known or in disregard of facts that contradict it. Prejudices are learned and can be unlearned.

Stereotype: An exaggerated or distorted belief that attributes characteristics to members of a particular group, simplistically lumping them together and refusing to acknowledge differences among members of the group.

Discrimination: The differential allocation of goods, resources, and services, and the limitation of access to full participation in society based on individual membership in a particular social group; reinforced by law, policy, and cultural norms that allow for differential treatment on the basis of identity.

Power: Hegemony helps us understand power as relational and dynamic, something that circulates within a web of relationships in which we all participate, rather than as something imposed from top down. Power operates not simply when persons or groups unilaterally imposes their will on others, but rather through ongoing systems mediated by, who usually unconsciously act as agents of oppression by merely going about their daily lives.

Internalized Dominance: Dominance is internalized when individuals in the advantaged/dominant group incorporate and accept prejudice against others and assume that their status quo is normal and correct for all people. The internalization of dominance maintains oppression.

Privilege: Unearned access to resources (social power) that are only readily available to some people because of their social group membership; an advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by one societal group above and beyond the common advantage of all other groups. Privilege is often invisible to those who have it.

Oppression: When a dominant group, whether knowingly or unknowingly, exploits a subordinate group for its own benefits. This pervasive system is rooted historically and maintained through individual and institutional/systematic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice, resulting in a condition of privilege for the dominant group at the expense of the subordinate group.

Internalized Oppression: Oppressive beliefs are internalized by subordinate groups, when members of the subordinate group accept and incorporate negative images of themselves fostered by the dominant
The internalization of oppression maintains the status quo, thus benefitting the dominant group, and may result in alienation, anxiety, and dissonance for subordinated groups.

**Horizontal Oppression:** The conscious and/or subconscious attitudes and behaviors exhibited in interactions among members of subordinated groups that support and stem from internalized oppression.

**Target/Subordinated Group:** Group experiencing lack of access to privilege and a narrowing of life opportunities for success, education, wealth, pursuit of happiness that goes beyond any personal shortcomings and instead that stems from oppression or marginalization according to social identity. Members of subordinated groups may experience internalized oppression.

**Agent/Dominant Group:** Group accorded privilege, power, and access to life opportunities stemming from membership or perceived membership in a privileged social identity group. Members of dominant groups may experience internalized dominance.

**Ally:** A person who actively works to eliminate the oppression and marginalization of people with an identity group with which they do not self-identify; includes educating oneself and others, providing support to individuals, and challenging oppressive remarks, behaviors, policies, and institutional structures. Being an ally to one member of a marginalized group does not mean that all members of that group will see you as such. Generally, you should not self-identify as an ally but instead wait to be seen as such by an individual within the identity group.

**Collusion:** Ways that members of agent and target groups think and act, often not consciously, to support oppressive systems and maintain the status quo; can be a result of internalized dominance or internalized oppression.

**Cultural Capital:** Non-financial social assets that promote social mobility beyond economic means. Examples may include education, intellect, style of speech, dress, physical appearance, access to networks, knowledge, and skills.

**Individual:** A single person thoughts, beliefs, and behavior.

**Group:** People who are associated with an identity group and that groups shared thoughts, beliefs, and norms.

**System:** A structure that is created and built to benefit the agent/dominant group at the expense of the target/subordinate group. Systems are pervasive and rooted in history.

**SPECIFIC IDENTITIES AND FORMS OF SOCIAL OPPRESSION**

**Temporarily Able Bodied (TAB):** A term used in disability rights communities as a reminder that many people will develop disabilities at some point in their lives due to accidents, illness (physical, mental, or emotional), or late-emerging effects of genetics.

**Ableism:** The system of discrimination and exclusion of people who live with developmental, medical, neurological, physical, and psychological disabilities, privilege those who are temporarily able; deeply rooted in the belief that people who’s physical, emotional, cognitive, and/or sensory abilities fall outside the scope of what is currently defined as socially acceptable cannot be productive members of society.
**Age:** Measured by years from birth; an assumption about age at Seattle University may include the belief that all or most students are “traditional-aged” (18-24) or that people may be perceived to be too young or told to hold their positions on campus.

**Ageism:** A process of systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against elders by youth and adults and against young people by adults and elders.

**Class/ Socio-Economic Status:** A relative social ranking based on income, wealth, education, status, and power.

**Classism:** The institutional, cultural, and individual set of practices and beliefs that assign differential value to people according to their socioeconomic class or status and privilege those with wealth and/or cultural capital that reflects an association with wealth.

**Race:** A social construct that artificially divides people into distinct groups based on characteristics such as physically appearance (particularly color), ancestral heritage, cultural affiliation, cultural history, ethnic classification, and the social, economic, and political needs of a society at a given period of time. Although race is a social construct, it has real impact on everyday lives.

**Racism:** The systematic subordination of members of targeted racial groups who have relatively little social power (in the United States, people of color) by the members of the agent racial group who have relatively more social power (in the United States, white people). This subordination is supported by the actions of individuals, cultural norms and values, and the institutional structures and practices of society.

**Ethnicity:** A social construct which divides people into smaller social groups based on characteristics such as shared sense of group membership, values, behavioral patterns, language, political and economic interest, history and ancestral geographical base.

**Ethnocentrism:** The tendency to believe that one’s ethnic or cultural group is centrally important, and that all other groups are measured in relation to one’s own, especially with concern to language, behavior, customs, and religion.

**Nationality:** The status of belonging to a particular nation, whether by birth or naturalization.

**Xenophobia:** Hatred or fear of those from a different country or strangers or of their politics or culture.

**Sex:** Biological determination, often assigned at birth.

**Sexism:** The cultural, institutional, and individual set of beliefs and practices that privilege men and masculinity, subordinate women, and denigrate values and practices associated with women and femininity.

**Gender:** A wide range of social/cultural meanings that are ascribed to biological sex; composed of both gender identity and gender expression.

**Gender Identity:** a person’s internal self-concept with regard to gender

**Gender Expression:** behaviors, such as attire, demeanor, and language through which we intentionally or unintentionally communicate gender based on the normative social construction of gender.
Cis-Gender: When a person’s gender identity and gender expression are aligned

Transgender*: Used broadly to describe people whose gender identities and/or gender expression do not match societal expectations and for whom this fact is central to their identity and/or important in determining their life circumstances. Transgender is not specific to one’s sexual orientation.

Transphobia: The fear and hatred of transgender and gender non-conforming individuals and what they do (or are feared to do), resulting from a gender binary that assumes all people to be either male/masculine or female/feminine. This ranges from disrespect, to denial of rights and needs, to violence.

Gender Oppression: The institutionalization of rights, access, and power to cis-gender individuals, who include those who experience a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, how they are perceived, and their personal identity; occurs in conjunction with the marginalization of individuals who are transgender, genderqueer, and/or gender non-conforming.

Sexual Orientation: The desire for intimate, emotional, and sexual relationships with people of the same gender, a different gender, or more than one gender.

Heterosexism: The institutionalization of societal/cultural, institutional, and individual beliefs and practices that assume that heterosexuality is the only natural, normal, acceptable sexual orientation, privileging individuals who engage in heteronormative practices and ways of living.

Heteronormative: The pervasive practices of individuals, groups, and systems that idealize desire for intimate, emotional, and sexual relationships with the opposite genders.

Homophobia: The fear, hatred, or intolerance of those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, or queer or of any behavior that is outside the boundaries of what may be considered “traditional” gender roles. This ranges from disrespect, to denial of rights and needs, to violence.

Religion/Spirituality: A formal or informal set of beliefs concerning cause, nature, and purpose, sometimes including devotional and ritual observances or containing a moral code governing behavior.

Religious Intolerance: The social structures, federal and local policies, and cultural practices that maintain religious hegemony through unquestioned norms, habits, language, symbols, and practices, such as recognized holidays and inclusion in politics.

Size/Body Diversity: A positive understanding of differences in size and body.

Sizeism: The cultural, institutional, and individual set of beliefs and practices that subordinate individuals and groups of size, shorter than average height, and/or taller than average height, based on stereotypes, attitudes, and beliefs that norm and privilege slender figures and median statures.

Definitions adapted from a variety of sources, including The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, United States Student Association, Social Justice Training Institute, and Readings for Diversity and Social Justice (2010, edited by Adams, M., Blumenfeld, W., Castañeda, C., Hackman, H., Peters, M., & Zúñiga, X.).