

2020-21

BIAS RESPONSE TEAM REPORT





WHAT IS THE BIAS RESPONSE TEAM?

Western is committed to fostering a caring and supportive environment that is equitable and just for all people in our community. The Bias Response Team (BRT) works toward this commitment by (1) supporting students, staff, and faculty who are targeted or impacted by bias incidents and (2) educating the Western community about bias.

 www.edu/sebrt

If you are dealing with a safety, medical, or mental health emergency, please call 911 or University Public Safety at (360) 650-3911. Mental health crisis services are also available for students 24/7 through the Counseling Center, (360) 650-3164.

WHAT IS A BIAS INCIDENT?

A bias incident is language or an action that demonstrates bias against an individual or group of people based on actual or perceived race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sex, gender identity or expression, disability, sexual orientation, age, or veteran status.

HOW CAN I REPORT A BIAS INCIDENT?

Students, staff, and faculty can notify the BRT by submitting an online notification form or directly contacting a member of the BRT. The form can be submitted anonymously.

When the BRT is notified of an incident, a member of the team contacts the person submitting the notification to offer support, discuss next steps, and share resources.

WHY SHOULD I NOTIFY THE BRT OF AN INCIDENT?

The BRT exists to provide our community with care and support. When the BRT is notified of a bias incident, it can coordinate support for people most impacted, work to limit the hurtful impacts of the incident, and advance learning aimed at preventing future similar acts.

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Letter from the Bias Response Team

Dear Western Community,

The Bias Response Team (BRT) was founded in August 2020. Our role is to identify and collaboratively coordinate responses to bias incidents to (1) support Western students, staff, and faculty who are targeted or impacted by these incidents and (2) educate the Western community about impacts and histories of such bias and actions to prevent future similar incidents. We also aim to educate the University community about how to notify the BRT of bias incidents.

The BRT responds caringly and promptly to (1) bias incidents that occur at any Western location, including the Bellingham campus and Western's locations in Anacortes, Bremerton, Everett, Port Angeles, and Poulsbo, or at a Western-sponsored activity and (2) at our discretion to significant incidents of bias beyond the University that impact people in our Western community. This requires anticipating likely impacts of bias incidents even before full impacts are shared by members of our community.

The following report is a summary of our activities during the BRT's inaugural academic year. Given the impactful and often deeply personal nature of incidents reported, identifying information has

been removed to respect privacy of the reporting parties. While privacy is paramount, so too is transparency. As a group we are committed to honestly representing the hurt experienced by members of our community this year, and the steps we have taken to provide support and resources to those affected.

It is important that we say "thank you" specifically to the students, faculty, and staff who reached out and spoke up when they were concerned that we as a community are not living up to our core principles. Thank you for letting us walk alongside you in these times. It has been an impactful journey for all of us too, working together in building a more accessible, equitable, and just community—and the work continues.

Thank you, too, for reading this report. If you have questions or feedback, please contact us at brt@wwu.edu.

In community,

2020-21 Bias Response Team
(members listed at end of report)

Bias Response Team Background

The Bias Response Team is part of Western's Structural Equity and Bias Response Team, which was created following a recommendation of the 2019-20 Council on Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice. The BRT furthers Western's commitments to access, diversity, equity, and inclusion. Its work particularly advances Western's third and fourth **strategic goals**, to foster a caring and supportive environment and to pursue justice and equity in our policies, practices, and impacts. Members of the BRT work as educators and with an ethos of care for our students and colleagues. The BRT recognizes both the right to freedom of speech and the imperative of creating welcoming places to learn for all students.

When it was established in summer 2020, the BRT created a **website** to share information about its role and how to report bias incidents. The BRT also established a protocol (**linked to here**) for responding to incidents of bias. Students, staff, and faculty can **notify the BRT of an incident** via the online notification form or by communicating directly with a member of BRT.

The BRT does not conduct investigations or impose discipline. Investigations of possible civil rights violations are conducted by the Office of Civil Rights & Title IX Compliance (for potential violations of university policy and civil law) and University Police (for potential criminal violations). Discipline is imposed only after a finding of a violation of law or policy and is imposed by the appropriate disciplinary entity (Student Conduct for students, supervisors/vice presidents for employees).

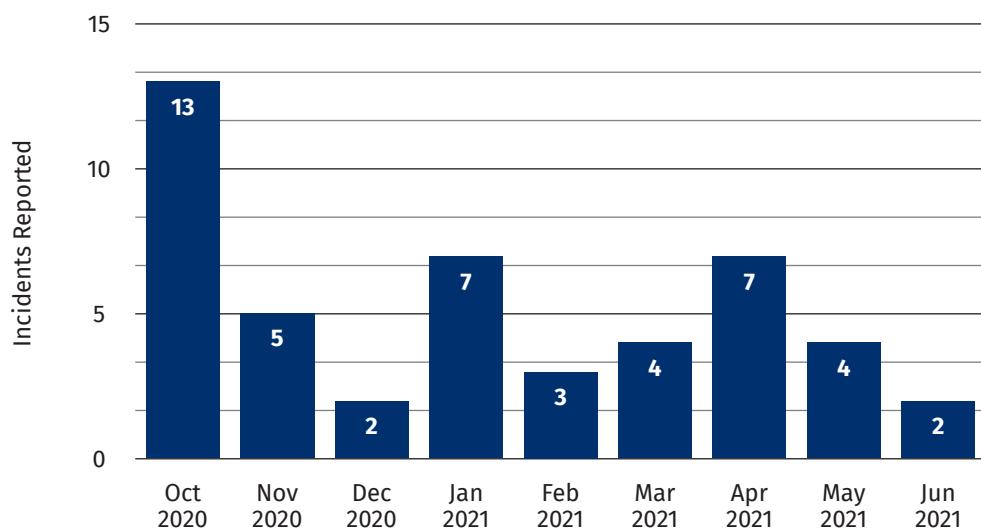
BRT Reports by the Numbers

2020-2021

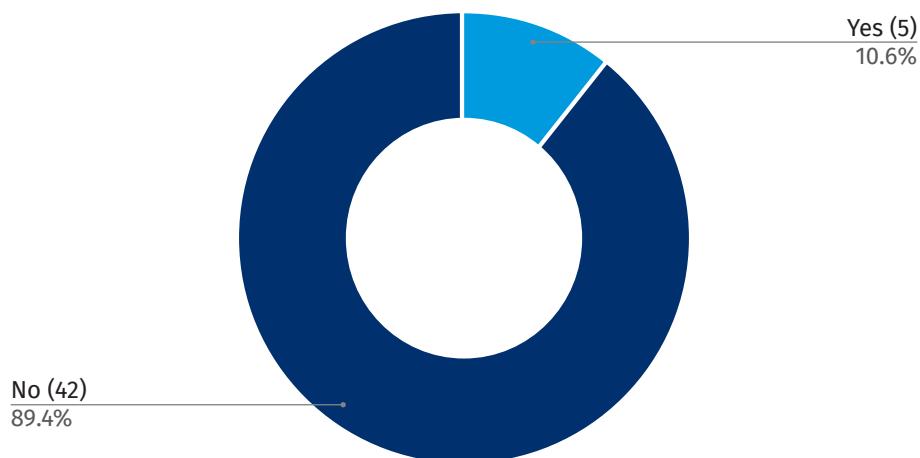
47

Incidents of Bias Reported

Reports Received: Timeframe

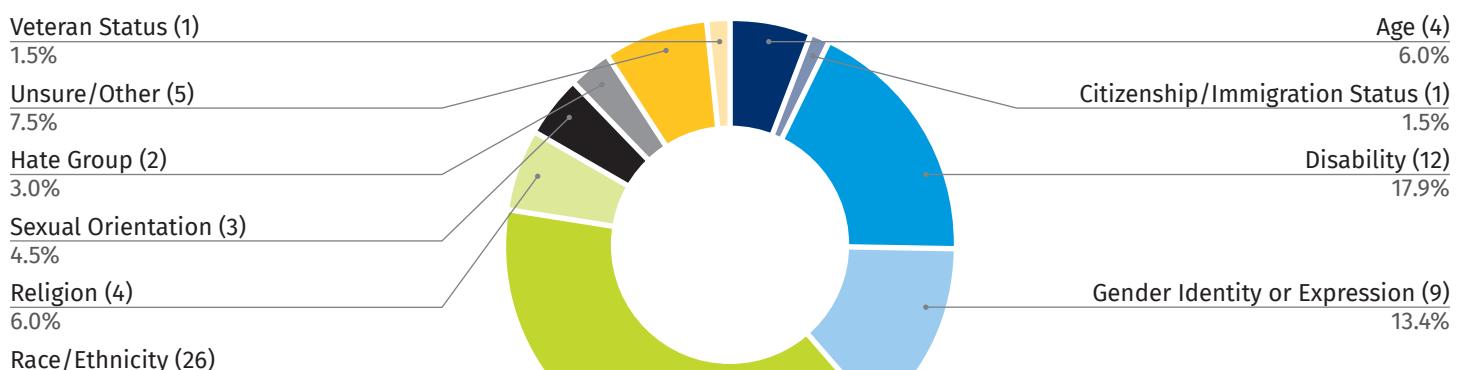


Anonymous Reporting



Type of Bias Reported

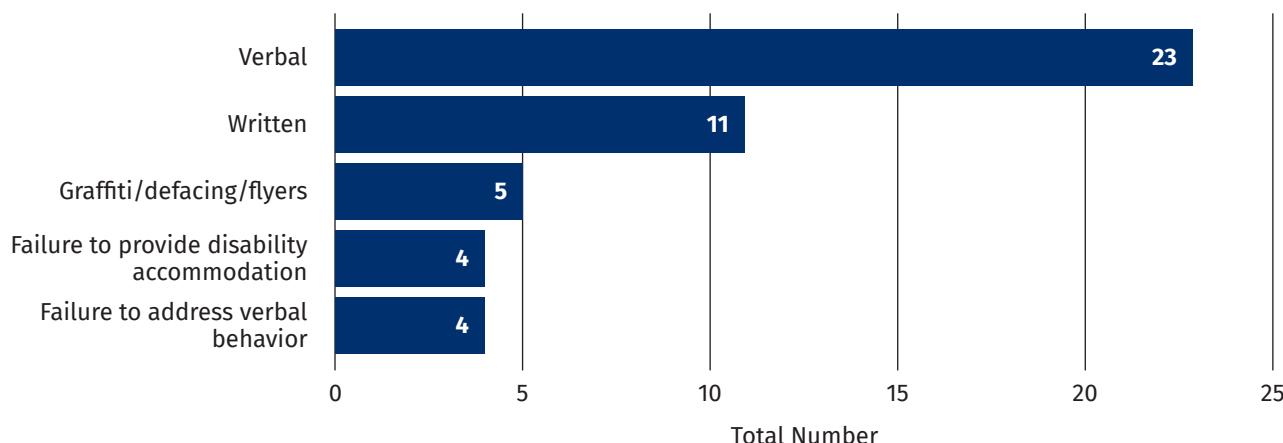
TYPE OF BIAS



Some notifications referenced more than one type of bias.
All types of bias reported in a notification are reflected above.

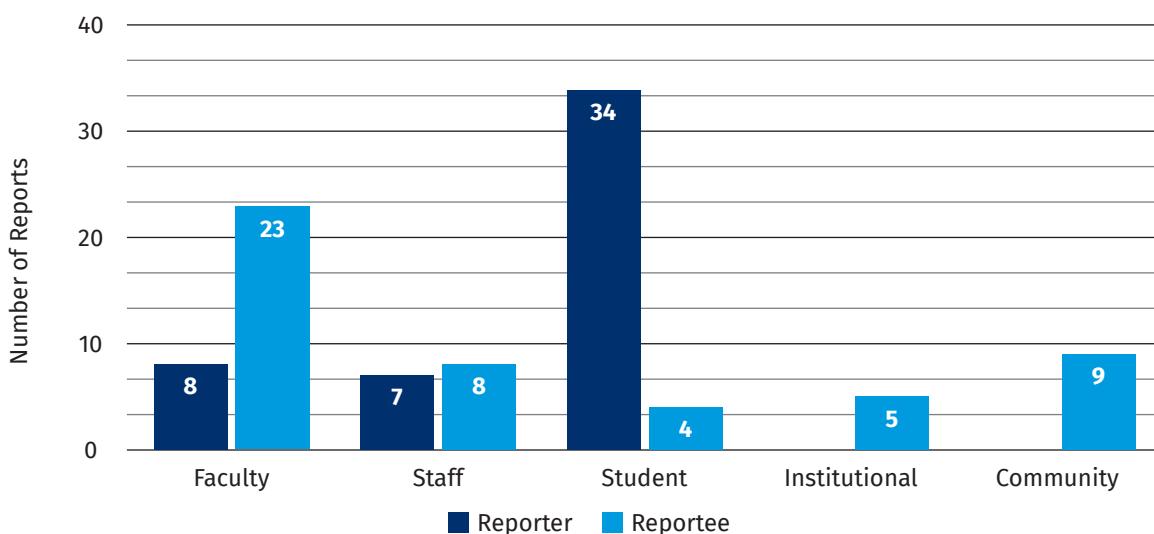
Type of Incident Reported

TYPE OF INCIDENT



Roles of Reporting Parties and Reportees

REPORTER AND REPORTEE ROLES



Institutional - refers to instances of reported bias that were part of an institutional action, such as a school-wide training or broadly published institutional message.

Community - refers to an incident of reported bias that occurred on or near the Bellingham campus not targeting a particular individual, such as bias in graffiti.

Summary of Bias Incident Themes and Responses

In total, the BRT received reports of 47 separate incidents of bias throughout the academic year. Most reports were submitted through the online notification form and most reporters self-identified rather than reporting anonymously. Reports were made by students, faculty, and staff. They reported concerns with interpersonal interactions, occurrences in or related to classes, institutional activities, and occurrences in the broader community. Additionally, some reports came through referrals from Western staff and faculty or through issues BRT members learned about in the course of their other professional duties or through local media. The significant volume of reports, the willingness of reporters to self-identify, and the broad cross-section of reporters indicate the BRT was visible and trusted to provide assistance in sensitive and difficult situations.

While it is difficult to summarize the unique and broad ranging concerns and responses, here are some examples that highlight the BRT's work:

- After online events experienced biased zoom bombings, BRT coordinated with ATUS to provide additional information to the university community about actions to prevent zoom bombing and steps to take if a zoom bombing occurs.
- When students raised concerns about faculty displaying bias or not addressing bias displayed by classmates, BRT members listened with care to student concerns, shared options for addressing the concerns, made appropriate referrals within the university, and engaged in educational conversations with faculty members.
- When an institution-wide training failed to provide effective closed captions and asked a survey question demonstrating a misunderstanding of LGBTQ+ identities, members of the BRT worked with Western colleagues and the vendor that created the training to quickly improve the training.
- When a tweet to Bellingham Police wrongly indicated that a Black Western student might be

a suspect in a crime, BRT worked with University Police and University Communications to have the harmful tweet removed, offer support to students, and provide feedback to Bellingham Police.

- When swastikas appeared on local businesses, BRT members worked to offer supportive space and counseling resources to students.

Additionally, national events impacted the experiences of Western students, faculty, and staff. After the failure to issue meaningful indictments in the killing of Breonna Taylor, around the Presidential election, after the storming of the Capitol, after the trial of Derek Chauvin for killing George Floyd, and in the face of racist activity directed at AAPI people, the BRT organized virtual support and discussion spaces. Students, faculty, staff, and alumnx connected in online spaces to be in community, talk, and share support and resources. The BRT extends great appreciation to colleagues in the Counseling Center and Ethnic Student Center for their partnerships and leadership in holding at least 11 community care and decompression spaces over the academic year.

One misconception the BRT will work to address next year is that many reporters believed the BRT was an investigatory or punitive body, or that the BRT could provide mediation services to resolve interpersonal disputes. The BRT will work to improve messaging that it is an educational and supportive resource hub and that the BRT does not conduct investigations (which is the purview of the Office of Civil Rights and Title IX Compliance) or issue sanctions.

The BRT is also developing educational programming and communications for the upcoming year, including "teach-ins" in collaboration with faculty to provide university-wide opportunities for learning related to issues of bias impacting people in the Western community. The BRT looks forward to building more partnerships as it grows and further focuses its work.

Recommendations

The BRT's first year of operation coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the remote nature of much of Western's operations during the 2020-21 year, reports received and addressed by the BRT this year may not be wholly indicative of the types of bias incidents people at Western might experience and report to the BRT when more students, faculty, and staff are on campus. Nonetheless, themes that emerged in bias incidents this year, including the high proportion of incidents involving bias based on race or ethnicity and of student concerns regarding incidents in classes or interactions with faculty, demonstrate the prudence of building university resources in the near term to better prevent and respond productively to such concerns in the future.

- 1. Western should hire and allocate resources to support the success of dedicated full-time professionals, likely housed within the Office of Equity, to engage in (a) productive educational conversations, (b) offer consultations, and (c) provide relevant proactive and reactive trainings for faculty, staff, and students to create more anti-racist, accessible, equitable, and inclusive environments.** It will be important to support these professionals with programmatic resources necessary to meaningfully fulfill their responsibilities. These professionals could have oversight of State Senate Bill 5227 funding for the purposes of developing anti-racism, access, diversity, equity, and inclusion trainings.

Interactions happening in academic courses are important and impactful. The number of concerns from students related to their courses is indicative of the need for greater resources and support to improve communications on ADEI topics and develop a more positive experience in courses and beyond for historically marginalized students.

- 2. Western should hire and allocate resources to support the success of at least one full-time dedicated professional, such as an ombud, to provide conflict resolution services including but not limited to mediation.** This professional must have a firm understanding of dynamics of

power and oppression and faculty rights and responsibilities, and ample time within their regular job responsibilities to engage in this time intensive work.

This position is needed because the majority of bias incidents were concerns of perceived bias in small group settings such as classrooms, meetings, and informal conversations. What happens in these settings can be extremely impactful to individuals. However, the BRT's work should be more narrowly focused on responding to incidents of bias that have a broad community impact. Staff serving on the BRT have other full-time responsibilities and cannot dedicate sufficient time to facilitate reconciliation at the scale required.

Furthermore, reports received by the BRT included student concerns regarding how faculty managed conversations regarding accessibility, diversity, equity, or inclusion (ADEI). The grading relationship between faculty and students creates a significant power differential and academic freedom is an added complexity when engaging in creating an inclusive and equitable teaching and learning experience. There is currently no resource at Western tasked with conducting conflict resolution and providing education for faculty and staff regarding dynamics of bias and inclusion separate from potentially investigatory proceedings that could lead to discipline. The BRT encourages building resources that are educational and restorative to serve Western students, faculty, and staff.

- 3. Formal, regular avenues of communication should be established between leaders of the Structural Equity and Bias Response Team and the Office of Equity.** Among other things, these avenues of communication will allow the Office of Equity's development and delivery of training and education to be informed by the specificities of what is being reported to the Bias Response Team. In the development of trainings and educational programming, it will be important for the Office of Equity to collaborate with faculty and staff with expertise in the topics being addressed.

Bias Response Team Roster 2020-2021

Brandon Joseph

Men's Resiliency Specialist (through April 2021)

Christian Urcia

Assistant Director, Residence Life

Jon McGough

Director, Disability Access Center

Keith Williams

Assistant Director of Public Safety

Litav Langley

Director, LGBTQ+ Western, SEBRT Chair (2020-21)

Mary Heller

Office of Civil Rights & Title IX Compliance (through April 2021)

Samantha Bragg

Office of Civil Rights & Title IX Compliance (beginning May 2021)

Michael Sledge

Associate Dean of Students/Executive Director – Student Life

Moya Lojewski

Ethnic Student Center Club Advising Manager (through April 2021)

Sarah Godoy

Director, Counseling Center

Shevell Thibou

Director, Teaching & Learning, Western Libraries



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Western is an equal opportunity institution.

*To request this document in an alternate
format, please contact brt@wwu.edu.*

