

# Student Evaluation—Summer 2020

## The Penn Experience: Racism, Reconciliation and Engagement

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The word cloud above is based on open-ended responses to the question, “How do you feel about taking this course?” from the pre-course survey.

### Course development and description

The collaboration between the School of Social Policy & Practice (SP2) and the School of Dental Medicine (PDM) came about as both schools were independently considering supplemental curricular and training options in the wake of concerns about racial microaggressions and institutional racism raised primarily by students of color. As chair of the social work racism course sequence, SP2 Associate Professor Amy Hillier began developing content for an online pre-matriculation course focused on racism during the summer of 2019. PDM Associate Professor and Director of Diversity and Inclusion Beverley Crawford had been providing support to students, staff and faculty to try to address a specific racial incident in the school when she reached out to Dr. Hillier. In October 2019. Deans Sara Bachman (SP2) and Mark Wolff (PDM) agreed to collaboratively develop and fund an online course for incoming students in both schools. In July 2020, PDM faculty decided to require students in all four years take the course for a grade while only incoming masters students at SP2 were required to take the course.

The course, entitled, “The Penn Experience: Racism, Reconciliation and Engagement,” launched via Canvas on July 15<sup>th</sup> with the following course description:

This new non-credit asynchronous course, consisting of six Modules, aims to establish common basic language and concepts for incoming graduate and professional students to facilitate subsequent difficult conversations about race, racism and difference in the classroom and beyond. Using video interviews, presentations, short readings and podcasts, the course highlights the significance of Penn and Philadelphia’s history of racism and other forms of oppression, Penn’s evolving relationship to West Philadelphia, and Penn’s efforts toward greater engagement and inclusion. Modules also focus on implicit bias, intercultural communication gender identity and disparities in healthcare. A final module was designed primarily to address the antiracist work that must be done to dismantle white supremacy. All incoming SP2 master’s students are expected to spend 20 or more hours reviewing the six modules and completing short assessments prior to starting the fall semester. Other graduate and professional schools will assign modules to be completed based on their school’s requirements.

## **Course purpose and objectives**

The purpose of this course was to prepare incoming graduate professional students to engage directly, honestly, and with humility in dialog and self-reflection relating to race/racism and oppression in the classroom and clinic/fieldwork sites. By setting high expectations for professional and academic work, this short course was intended to accelerate, not replace, classroom and other discussion of these important topics.

Upon completion of this online course, incoming student will:

- Have basic knowledge of the history and historical tensions, demographics, social and political issues relating to racism and oppression in Philadelphia and partnerships between Penn and West Philadelphia communities;
- Be able to discuss and define restorative justice, implicit bias and microaggressions; have increased self-awareness of the impact one’s language and behavior can have on others;
- Have basic understanding of key concepts and theories relating to racism and oppression; Be prepared to engage critically and with humility with issues of race/racism and oppression in the classroom and in professional practice;
- Know what the social determinants of health are and how they impact access to care and further health disparities;
- Understand gender identity, why pronouns matter, and the importance of a practitioners with cultural humility in the healthcare setting
- Understand white privilege, white supremacy, and white fragility in the current context of the Black Lives Matter movement and the increasing presence of extremist groups.

## **Overview of evaluation instrument**

All enrolled students were asked to complete Qualtrics surveys prior to reviewing any course content and upon completing the course. Students were asked to create a 10-character unique identifier for the pre-course and post-course surveys, to maintain anonymity while allowing for individual-level before-and-after comparisons.

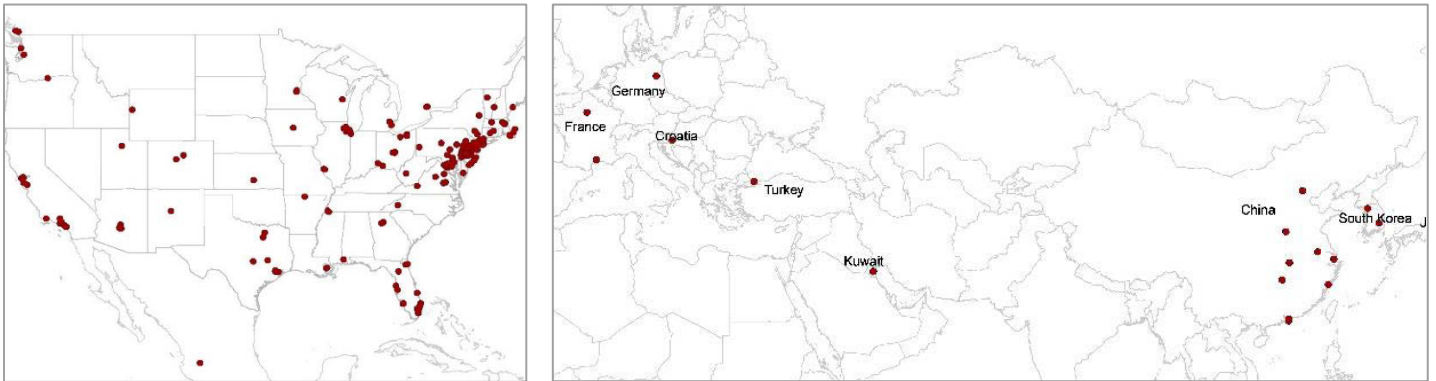
The pre-course survey asked close-ended questions including how much students knew about Philadelphia, how likely they were to engage with residents and explore West Philadelphia, how confident they were

discussing a series of topics related to racism and oppression, and an open-ended question about how they felt about taking the course.

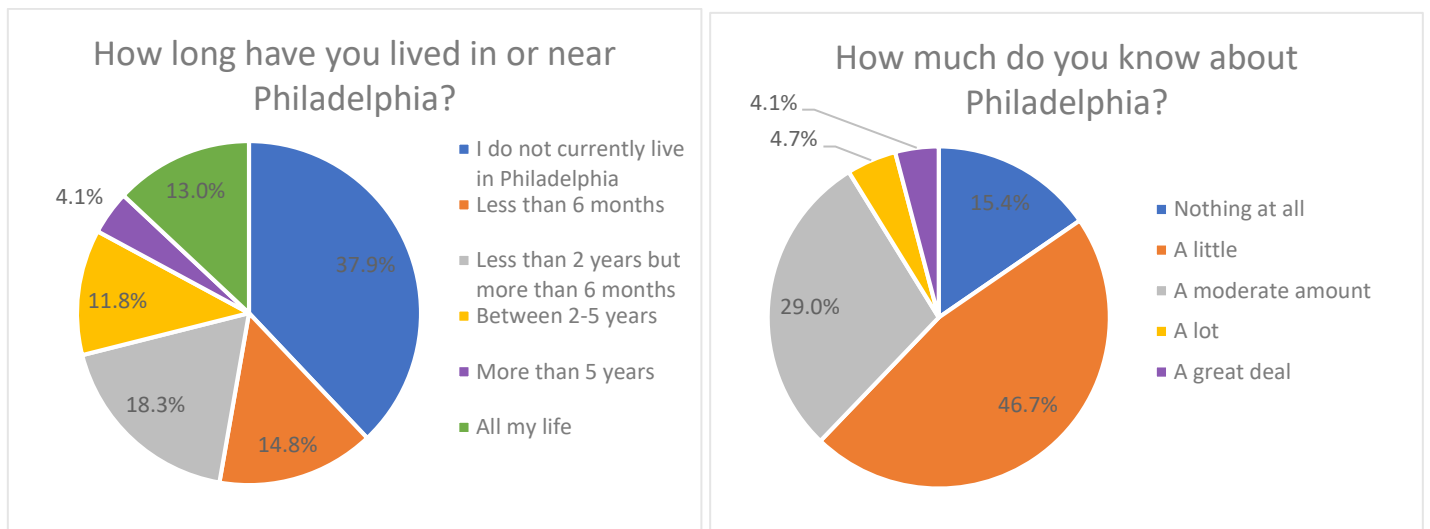
The post-course survey repeated the close-ended questions from the pre-course survey, adding close-ended questions about the overall quality of the course the amount learned from each module and open-ended questions about what was most and least helpful. Students were asked to identify their academic program in the post-course survey but not the pre-course survey.

## Pre-Course Survey Results

542 students completed the pre-course survey between July 15<sup>th</sup> and September 11<sup>th</sup>. Qualtrics recorded the location where participants completed the survey based on their IP addresses.

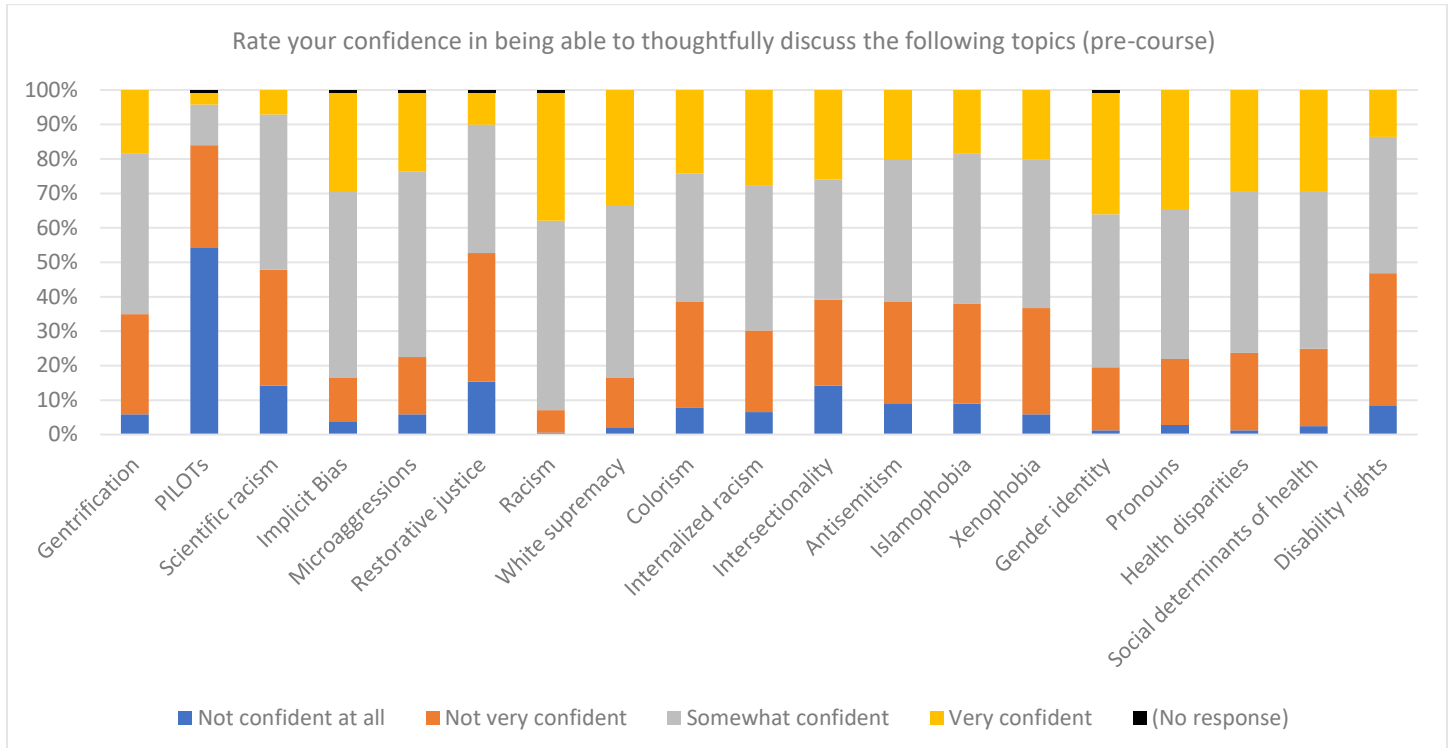


Participants were asked to select how long they have lived in Philadelphia, how much they know about Philadelphia, and how likely they were to engage with West Philadelphia residents and explore the West Philadelphia community. More than half (52.7%) of respondents either did not live in Philadelphia or had lived in Philadelphia for less than six months when they started the course. Nearly one-third (62.7%) stated that they knew either “nothing at all” or “a little” about Philadelphia.



Before beginning the course, students were asked to consider how confidently they could discuss a variety of topics with their peers, ranking their confidence from “not confident at all” to “extremely confident.” These questions matched the topics covered in the course. The most common response for students was “somewhat

confident.” Students demonstrated the least amount of confidence in discussing scientific racism, PILOTS (Payments in Lieu of Taxes), and restorative justice.



The pre-course survey also measured attitudes about the course, asking students the open-ended question, “How do you feel about taking this course?” The vast majority (84.0%) of responses were positive. Positive themes included excitement, gratitude, hope, happiness, curiosity, open-mindedness, and interest. Other positive responses included beliefs that the course was "necessary" or "important." One dental school respondent stated,

*[This] is a necessary course that all Penn students should take. The demographics of Penn dental classes are not the most diverse (in terms of race), but as a dental professional, everyone should know how to treat other races, cultures, creeds and genders properly without offending anyone.*

Less than 13 percent (12.8%) of responses were neutral, including words like "comfortable," "indifferent," and "okay" as well as blank responses. A small percentage of responses indicated feeling anxious (2.3%) or had negative feelings (0.9%). Some of those who expressed anxiety described concern about the design of the course, particularly in regard to the placement of a page called "Whiteness and Jewish Identity.” One "anxious" response stated, "I feel super nervous, because I have never had any courses like this and I am afraid of messing it up."

Some negative responses expressed skepticism regarding the course's ability to effect change.

*[I feel] frustrated that Penn's efforts to respond to racism and systematic oppression means extra work for a group of people (MSW/SP2 students) most likely to already be dedicated to and knowledgeable about these topics. The school could enact meaningful, material change re: PILOTs, Penn Police reform, and efforts to combat the gentrification it's wrought, but instead is assigning homework.*

Other negative responses indicated a sense of frustration at a perceived lack of communication from the schools about the course.

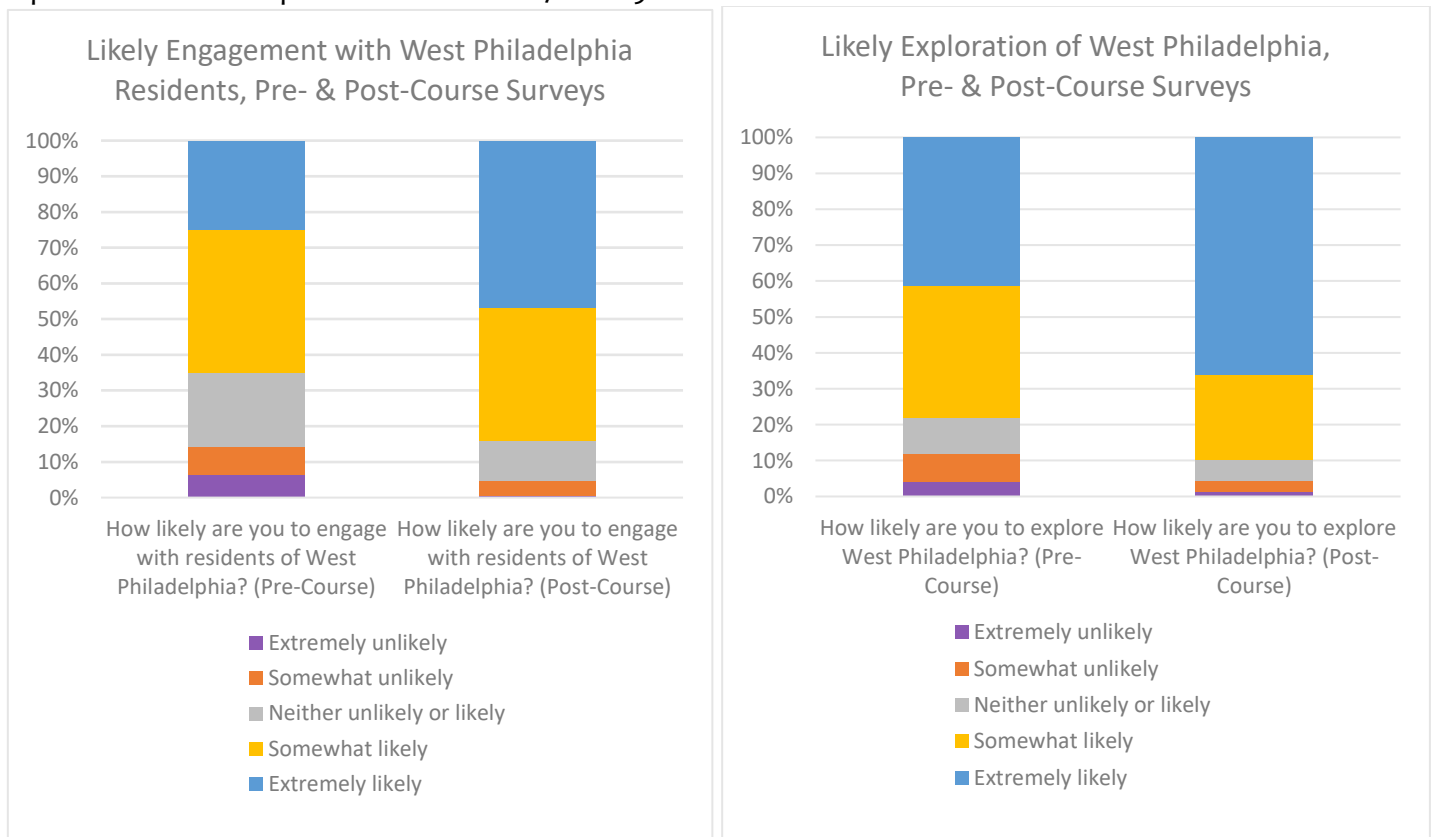
## Post-Course Survey Results

284 students completed the post-course survey by September 11<sup>th</sup>. We were able to match pre- and post-course survey responses for 169 of these students<sup>1</sup>.

What degree program(s) have you completed or are you currently enrolled in at Penn?

<b>School of Dental Medicine</b>	DMD	72	42.6%	n= 72, 42.6%
<b>School of Social Policy and Practice</b>	MSSP, MSSP+DA	26	15.4%	n= 80, 47.4%
	MSW	38	22.5%	
	NPL	16	9.5%	
<b>Weitzman School of Design</b>	MCP	5	3.0%	n= 5, 3%
<b>Other</b>	Additional degree not listed, no response	11	6.5%	n= 11, 6.5%

During the pre-course survey, just under two-thirds of students (65%) stated they extremely or somewhat likely to engage with West Philadelphia residents before starting the survey. In the post-course survey, this increased to 85%. Similarly, the proportion of students who said they would be extremely likely or somewhat likely to explore West Philadelphia increased from 78% to 90%.



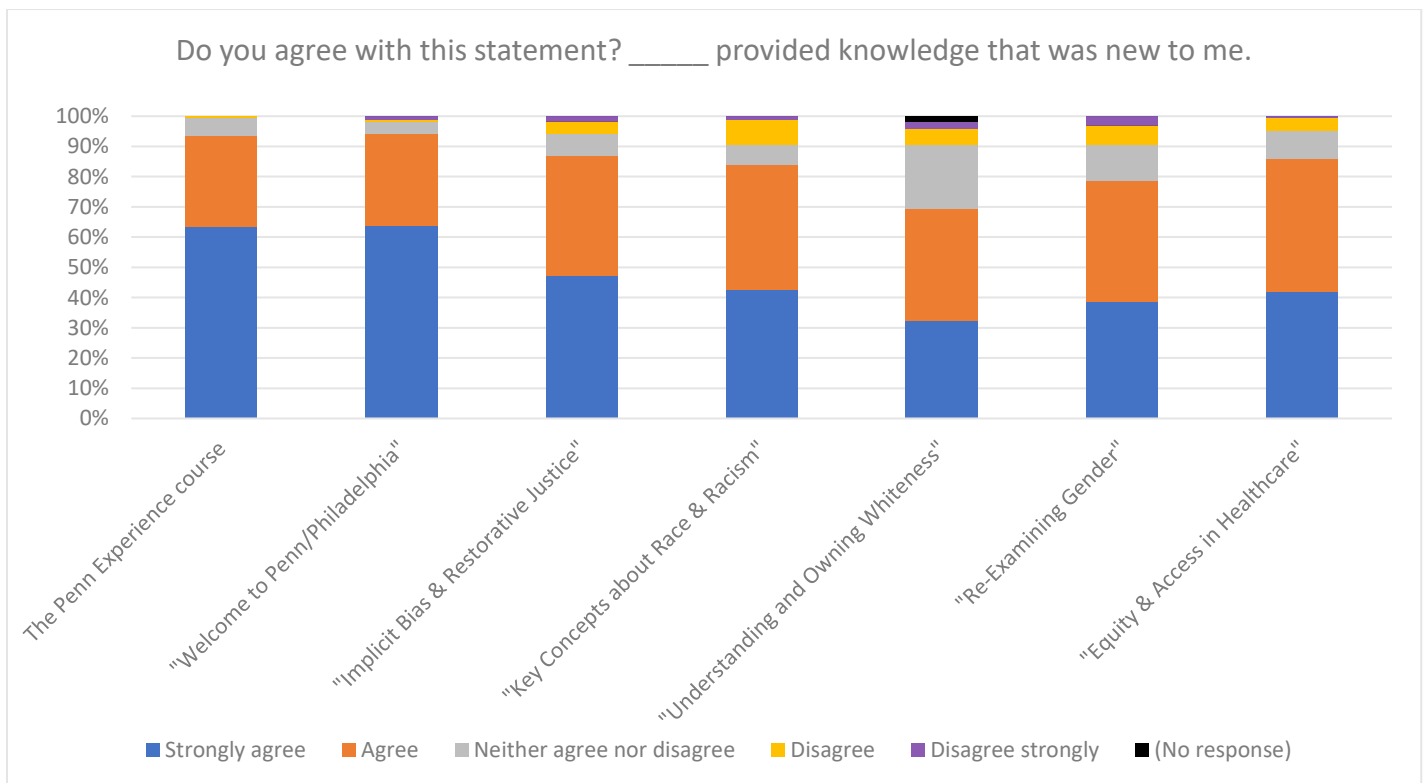
<sup>1</sup> This relatively low match rate reflects problems students had re-creating the exact unique identifier for the post-course survey. We did not collect any information about participants in the pre-course survey so we are not able to determine if this group of 169 is representative of the larger group of 284 who completed the course (although we have no reason to believe they are not representative).

Students were asked to rank their knowledge about Philadelphia on a score of 1-5 (as they were during the pre-course survey). Numerical rankings corresponded to the following: (1) nothing at all; (2) a little; (3) a moderate amount; (4) a lot; and (5) a great deal. Students' knowledge of Philadelphia increased from a pre-course mean score of 2.36 ("a little") to a post-course mean score of 3.44 ("a moderate amount"), an increase of +1.083.

Students were asked to rank the overall quality of this course on a range from 0 to 10, with 0 being the worst and 10 being the best. Dental and SP2 students rated the course similarly.

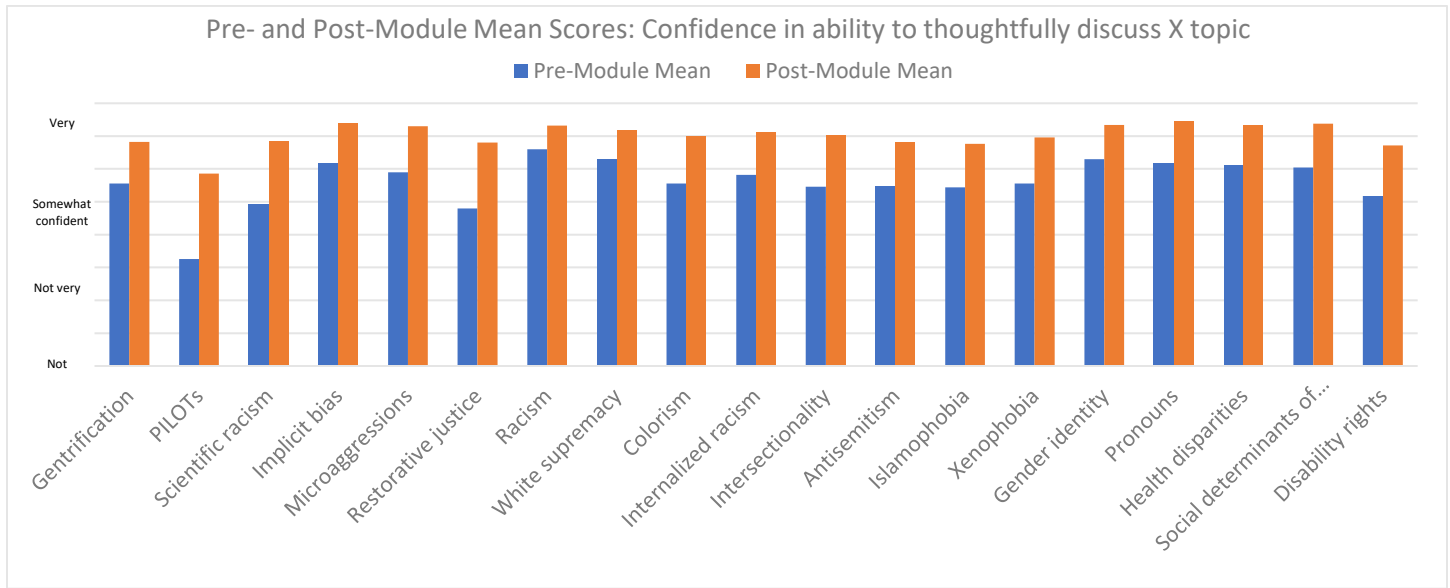
Course Quality	All Students (N=169)	Dental Students (n=72)	SP2 Students (n=82)
Mean	8.23	8.11	8.28
Median	8.00	8.50	8.00
Maximum	10	10	10
Minimum	1	1	4
(Missing data)	13	2	10

Students were then asked to evaluate the degree to which the Penn Experience course and individual modules provided new knowledge, using a five-point scale of disagree strongly (1) to strongly agree (5). Across all topics, on average, 84.6% of students chose "strongly agree" (47.2% mean across all topics) or "agree" (37.4% mean across all topics).



Students were also asked to rank their confidence in discussing topics covered by the course, using a score of 1-4. Numerical rankings corresponded to the following: (1) not confident at all; (2) not very confident; (3) somewhat confident; and (4) very confident. Confidence levels increased for each topic, with the largest

increases in mean scores occurring for PILOTs (+1.302), restorative justice (+1.006), and intersectionality (+0.781).



The post-course survey concluded with three open-ended questions, which asked students to consider what they found most helpful about the course, least helpful about the course, and what suggestions they would make to improve the course.

### **What did you find most helpful about the course?**

Students overwhelmingly responded that the course content helpful. A large proportion of students commented on the value of the introductory module (Welcome to Penn/Philadelphia). Students remarked that getting some Philadelphia context was “SO vital and helpful [in getting] a better sense of both the systemic challenges that the region faces and Penn’s complex history,” and stated that this information would help make Penn students the “most responsible agent[s] of social change possible.” Other students mentioned wanting to know how to “navigate throughout the Philly community with respect and humility,” and stated that the “Welcome to Penn” module would assist them in doing so.

Other students commented on the inclusive nature of the course, noting that “it was helpful to hear and learn about perspectives from actual agents, people who were part of the narrative. This was refreshing from other courses I have taken.” One student wrote that they enjoyed “hearing the perspective of people who identify within affinity/marginalized groups. To hear their voices, ideas, and hopes was wonderful.” Several students noted that hearing from Penn students and faculty helped them feel connected to campus—an added benefit in this remote-learning era.

Some international students appreciated the opportunity to learn about topics as they are specific to the U.S. experience, particularly matters relating to race and LGBTQ+ rights. One student thanked the course for giving them “a chance to learn more about racism, which is a special issue in the U.S., and form an appropriate viewpoint over it during the “Black Lives Matter” movement.” Another commented that they appreciated the opportunity to learn more about the LGBTQ+ community, acknowledging that “I didn’t know much about LGBT community because it was so taboo in my country, and now I know a lot more about their community.” The course made at least one student look forward to coming to campus; they wrote, “This course makes me long for the life in America and in Penn, because I cannot wait to get involved in the multi-cultural society!”

Many students found that the course design facilitated learning. Content was presented using a variety of media, including video testimonials, interviews, podcasts, news articles, TED talks, and more. Multiple students expressed gratitude for the high number of videos and the extensive additional resources included. Each module concluded with a series of questions and open-ended reflection prompts. Students appreciated the open-ended questions; one commented that the prompts “*really helped me to think about my past and how I want to act in the future.*” One student commented on the “clear organization” of the course and how the modules fit together to make a cohesive whole.

### ***What did you find least helpful about this course?***

Students were not universally pleased, of course. Some students (approximately 17%) remarked that the scope of the course was too broad. For some of these students, the breadth of topics meant that each topic received only superficial attention. For others, the course was simply overwhelming: there were too many videos, too many resources, too much material, and too little time. Many of these students commented that the videos were too long, one stating that the “*excessive length made it difficult to fully focus and engage.*”

A few students expressed frustration at the timeline expected to complete the course. One commented that they were “*overwhelmed by the amount of videos and articles given that we had such a short amount of time to complete this course, which led me to skip over most of them,*” and noted that they would have “*gotten even more out of the course if we had the whole summer to complete it.*”

Other students pointed out apparent disparities between modules and pushed for deeper, more inclusive education. Module 5, “Re-Examining Gender,” drew criticism for appearing to have been approached with less depth and care as other modules, as did Module 6 (“Equity and Access in Healthcare”). One student commented that they would have appreciated more attention to “*the history of the LGBTQ+ community in Philly more broadly*” and “*more insight into some [of] the questions/issues related to intersectionality of race/gender identity.*” Some students thought that the disability rights section was “*underdeveloped*” and “*glossed over.*” A few called for more critical engagement with the issues being explored, and asked for more robust, in-depth opportunities.

Other students questioned whether the course was a replacement for substantive action on the part of the University. One student wrote, “*I would like to know what is going to be done outside of this course. How is Penn going to help their students/faculty and staff that are black/minorities?*”

A small number of students cited issues concerning perceived affronts to identity. Some thought it was overtly and inappropriately political; one stated that “*Politics should not be involved in our dental curriculum.*” One student wrote that the “*tone of the course was unfairly harsh toward white students,*” while another commented that the course designers “*failed to recognize that there are biases against straight people, white people, and males.*” A few students challenged the placement of the antisemitism course within the “Owning Whiteness” module, with one writing that “*anti-Semitism is a topic all people of all races should be educated on, not just white students.*” (NOTE: Antisemitism is addressed in Module 3 “Racism and Other Forms of Oppression; the topic in Module 4 “Understanding and Owning Whiteness” is on whiteness and Jewish identity). For other students, the module on racism did not go deeply enough. One commented that the course should address “*the present-day consequences of historic racism/how it fuels the different structures of racism we see today,*” suggesting that the course could, for example, examine the connections between slavery and mass incarceration.



## **What suggestions do you have for improving this course?**

Students provided a rich and varied list of suggestions for ways to improve the course. Suggestions generally fell into three categories: course design, course content, and implementation.

### Course Design:

Students offered many concrete ways to improve the learning experience, including:

- Increasing the amount of written content, including adding academic and scholarly articles
- Ensure all videos are closed captioned with transcripts available
- Reduce the number of videos
- Curate the number of resources, or provide expectations about learning responsibilities (e.g., these readings are required, these are suggested)
- Add course outlines and learning objectives to each module
- Make each module equal in length
- Increase the number of student videos and student voices

### Course content:

Many students offered suggestions for additional information. Some requested that the course include specific calls to action at the end of the course or at the end of each module, so that learning could be immediately operationalized. One student asked that the course *“add more positive elements of the Black identity—we are too often inundated with the harsh realities of hardship in our lives, which leads to further exhaustion triggered by internalized trauma.”* Several students requested that content regarding Asian, Latinx and Hispanic, and immigrant communities be integrated. Others asked that the course tie content back to Philadelphia more consistently.

A few students asked that the course content go deeper, some stating that the information offered was superficial and did not challenge graduate-level students to think critically. Multiple students suggested ways that the modules could connect content to Penn and to institutions of higher education. One argued that the disability rights module should have explored *“how higher education . . . continues to contribute harmful frames from the medical model, and [continues to contribute] expertise ‘about’ disability without actually including the disability community.”* They added that *“it would have been helpful to hear from Penn students with both physical and non-physical disabilities about their experiences, particularly with respect to accessibility (architectural, digital, etc.) and inclusion in the classroom and Penn community.”*

Similarly, another student challenged the University to *“recognize that racism is a present and current problem at [Penn]”,* stating that *“Penn needs to do a better job at acknowledging their own CURRENT complicity, yielding positions of power to marginalized candidates, and using its platform to advocate for anti-racist policies and practices.”* Other students asked that the course include information regarding how the University itself is working to address these issues.

### Course implementation:

Comments about course implementation fell along three lines: the desire for interaction, a desire for broader availability, and suggestions for how to better rollout the course itself.

Many students (approximately 13%) expressed the desire to learn in community with others. One student suggested making this course an actual class and offering it over the course of a semester. Others thought that working through the course module-by-module over the course of the academic year with a discussion group would be helpful. Many students requested optional opportunities for discussion with other students, with one

student requesting the creation of affinity groups for white students to discuss the Understanding and Owning Whiteness module.

A second theme involved the course availability. Some respondents asked that all students, including doctoral students, be required to take the course. Others asked that the course be made available to anyone with a PennKey. One even stated, *“I think everyone in America should take this course”!*

The last theme reflected poor communication from the schools. Multiple students requested that the schools improve their communications regarding course expectations, specifically whether or not the course would be graded. Some asked that they be given more time to complete the course and stated that their schools informed them of this requirement much later than they would have preferred.

## **Next Steps—Version 2.0**

Staff, students, and faculty from multiple schools and programs have reached out to request access to the course and expressed interest in having their students take the course next year. We will continue to develop these relationships, focusing on other graduate professional schools and programs, with the intention of expanding the leadership for this course. We will work with colleagues across campus to develop a structure—perhaps an advisory group with a representative from each participating school—to make decisions about curriculum, format/structure, enrollment, evaluation and funding. We envision further developing and revising our existing modules and possibly developing additional modules, then allowing individual schools to choose the combination and order of modules to use with their students. Each participating school would be responsible for managing their own course canvas site and should plan to identify their own course director and graduate student TAs to support the course. We plan to make the next version 2.0 available by the beginning of June 2021.

For more information or to request access to the canvas course, please contact:

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