



University Life Faculty Fellows Program (AY25-26)
Dr. Graziella Pagliarulo McCarron | Center for Leadership and Intercultural Engagement
Report: Spring 2026

Project

Bridging Differences & Increasing Understanding in Curricular Spaces via Digitized Learning Modules

Overview

[Dr. Graziella Pagliarulo McCarron](#) (Associate Professor of Leadership Studies and Graduate Faculty, Higher Education Program | School of Integrative Studies [SIS]) partnered with [Dr. Nicholas Lennon](#), co-Director of the GMU Center for Leadership and Intercultural Engagement (CLIE) with the aim of supporting the expansion of "conversations across difference" into curricular spaces. Description and outcomes of the fellowship, which took place during AY25-26, are shared below.

Description

GMU's CLIE "offers interactive workshops that empower participants to create meaningful connections, build leadership skills, and drive positive change."¹ One of these student-centered programs—Bridging Differences: Increasing Understanding (BDIU)—is an evidence-grounded facilitation that supports students in developing dialogue skills toward enriching understanding of individuals whose ideologies differ from their own across a range of issues. BDIU was designed as an in-person, 1.5-2-hour experience focused on coaching students to develop capacity in the following five areas:

- Practicing compassionate curiosity
- Asking non-polarizing questions to improve conversation
- Listening to understand
- Sharing relatable stories
- Building bridges across different perspectives

While considering the in-person nature of the BDIU program, Dr. Pagliarulo McCarron and Dr. Lennon hypothesized that BDIU could support more GMU students via a scalable, online infrastructure. Thus, this fellowship leveraged Dr. Pagliarulo McCarron's expertise in digital leadership pedagogy design to convert BDIU into online, asynchronous Canvas-ready mini-modules that could be embedded in university courses for which learning outcomes aligned with BDIU purposes. The modules followed core teaching frameworks such as triple alignment that tightly connected learning outcomes, assignments, and assessments. Additionally, the modules drew from teaching best practices such as reflection to scaffold students' meaning-making of the online, asynchronous content.

The digital BDIU pilot launched in Fall 2025 congruent with iterative design tenets. Project milestones are outlined in the *Timeline and Accomplishments* section below.

Timeline and Accomplishments

Fall 2025

- *Late August/Early September:* Collaborative efforts (Dr. Pagliarulo McCarron/Dr. Lennon) focused on deep examination of the existing in-person BDIU program to include learning outcomes, presentation artifacts, media, in-person delivery process, and student needs.
- *September:* (a) Canvas-based prototype of online, asynchronous BDIU mini-modules developed by Dr. Pagliarulo McCarron for initial review. (b) Collaborative efforts with Dr. Lennon to refine mini-

¹ <https://clie.gmu.edu/workshops/>

modules and create video content delivering core BDIU concepts. (c) University course (INTS101 Narratives of Identity-Fall 2025) confirmed as pilot partner with gracious support of course coordinator (Dr. Shayna Maskell) and individual section instructors. (d) Pre- and post-digital BDIU assessments created and/or refined in Qualtrics based on learning outcomes.

- *Early-Mid October:* Digital BDIU pilot design finalized and, along with pre- and post-assessments, deployed to INTS101 Narratives of Identity students (n=117) as part of enriching current course content focused on identity and communication.
- *Late October/November:* (a) Monitoring of instructor and student experience. (b) Creation and deployment of feedback platform for INTS101 Narratives of Identity faculty to share concerns/areas of improvement. (c) Recruitment of panel of graduate assistants to conduct independent review of the mini-modules based on student and faculty feedback.
- *December/Mid-January:* (a) Data collection and analysis with respect to student, faculty, and graduate student panel review. (b) Rapid refinement of modules and INTS406 Global Leadership confirmed as pilot-2/Spring 2026 partner with kind support of course instructor (Dr. Aoi Yamanaka).

Spring 2026

- *Late January/February:* Digital BDIU pilot-2 design finalized and, along with pre- and post-assessments, deployed to INTS406 Global Leadership students (n=25) as part of enriching current course content focused on dialogue across difference.
- *March through May:* (a) Monitoring of instructor and student experience. (b) Feedback collection from INTS406 Global Leadership faculty with respect to concerns/areas of improvement.
- *Mid-April:* Collective feedback meeting with Dr. Shayna Maskell and Dr. Aoi Yamanaka with re-design recommendations for better student support focused on Fall 2026 deployment in both courses.
- *Late April:* Project preliminary impact findings from Fall 2025 BDIU modules shared at University Life Faculty Fellows Showcase. Key highlights follow from INTS101 student post-survey²:
 - ~75% would recommend or highly recommend the program to other faculty, students, staff
 - ~94% felt somewhat or extremely able re: contributing toward making positive change as a result of the program
 - ~80% felt that the program was very or extremely helpful regarding further developing skills in listening to understand, building bridges across difference, asking non-polarizing questions, practicing compassionate curiosity, sharing relatable stories.

Additional feedback from instructors and the graduate student panel review indicated both the effectiveness of the mini-modules as well as the challenges and areas for improvement. One such challenge area spoke to the somewhat burdensome navigation to a Canvas learning page outside of the standard course. Additionally, feedback indicated that reflective assignments could be streamlined and simplified in order to engage students more deeply and increase learner benefit.

Next Steps

The digitized BDIU mini-modules proved a viable way forward for expanding CLIE's dialogue across difference programs into the curricular space with the express goal of supporting GMU students in developing and enhancing skills for communicating across difference. Next steps include formalizing the collective feedback from INTS101 and INTS406 students and instructors into a syllabus component enabling a more seamless integration that is most helpful to students in their learning and development and that is aligned with instructor approaches (pedagogical and curricular). In addition to showcasing a proof of concept for supporting more GMU students, this pilot offered an opportunity to (re)imagine ways in which other in-person programs could be digitized to meet students' needs.

² Yield=18% post-assessment