

A World Pandemic and a Clarion Call: The New Push for DEI Initiatives in Higher Education

Alexis J. Pride

Columbia College Chicago, Unites States

Abstract: Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is a term used to describe policies and programs that promote the representation and participation of different groups of individuals, including people of different ages, races and ethnicities, abilities and disabilities, genders, religions, cultures, and sexual orientations. [1] Diversity, as it relates to a group or persons, or a community of people, is identified by various characteristics. This includes distinctions of social orientation and class, and cultural identity. When equity is present within a group, the result is equal access enjoyed by everyone; this includes equal opportunities as well as the potential for advancements. The American Council on Education (ACE) argues that the objectives of DEI initiatives have been voiced actively for years, targeting inequities in education. However, the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the systemic racism in America, and the race-based inequities in higher education—have converged to create a critical mass and sharpen the demand for more effective approaches to address the DEI needs at the university and college levels. This paper will offer a research-based examination of these principles, and how they can and are being applied in university classrooms to ensure equity standards in learning opportunities.

Keywords: DEI, Diversity, Inclusion, Multi-cultural, Cultural

Introduction

The objective of equity is to annihilate obstacles that have been barriers to some, prohibiting them from full participation and access. For those who work in education and leaders who seek to promote the educational well-being for all, this is a particular concern. We seek to advance diversity initiatives, with the belief that a diverse community in the classroom and university environment can enhance the learning experience. George Floyd's gruesome and tragic murder, seen by a quarantined world amidst a pandemic, focused attention on the inequities that have historically plagued American society. Without question, the complexity of these inequities is far reaching across social, ethnic, cultural, and economic lines; related, inequities in education are also pervasive, and demand a response from university and college leaders. Many in educational leadership see this as an opportunity to create impactful and lasting improvements that will benefit the lives of the underprivileged and people of color.

By advancing the importance of diversity in the classroom, assuming a leadership approach that is equity-centered, and working toward greater inclusion, educational leaders can ensure that our colleges and universities deliver on America's promise of higher education for every student who aspires to this achievement.

As faculty at Columbia College Chicago, my colleagues and I were forced to reconsider our approach to teaching in light of COVID-19 and the subsequent quarantine. Within a scant two weeks, we shifted from in-person to online classes. The transition presented many challenges as we worked to deliver substantive classroom experiences from the safe confines of our individual homes. We understood the critical nature of this period in educating our students, and the importance of realizing the college's missions. The transition to remote learning in the spring 2020 semester quickly exposed the inequities among our student body. Many were ill-prepared to engage in online course offerings, with inefficient technical facilities, or no consistent access to computers.

Amidst faculty meetings wherein issues of inequity and COVID-19 dominated the agenda, our attention was galvanized by the news of George Floyd, an African American man who was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis. Almost immediately, conversations regarding inequities in education rippled outward to include an examination of inequities across every stratum of human existence for people of color living in White America. And the conversation grew to gain intense global interest. The crisis facing our nation sharpened our focus, as an institution, to view our work with an energized purpose, greater creativity and problem-solving, and with a sense of urgency. Columbia's response to the social crisis of inequity is not unique, fortunately. The healthcare disparities for the poor, largely people of color, raised interest in national statistics related to education for this segment of the American population.

There has been a call for increased attention to racial segregation in U.S. schools, linked to communities and its resources. Some of the most vocal have been parents, educators, and employers who are reassessing their priorities in consideration of our increasingly global economy and the U.S. demographic changes and migration patterns. [1] According to Higher Education Today.org, for the first time, the K–12 student population in the United States has shrunken in numbers, representing less than 50 percent white, non-Hispanic. Comparatively, in geographic areas that are largely metropolitan, large-scale migration patterns can be observed, as more black, Hispanic, and Asian families secure dwellings in the suburbs and more whites return to “gentrifying” urban neighborhoods. The result is a diversification of communities being formed, if only for a short period, before familiar patterns of racial segregation re-constitutes. [2] These recent developments signal a critical moment in history. We, as a nation, are at an intersection that presents the following: the potential of more racial unrest along with the potential of racial healing. This can be accomplished because of our society's social, racial, and economic divisions decreasing, and increased equality and greater accessibility to resources granted to everyone.

Columbia's response to the DEI initiative is a multicultural educational experience for students; moreover, for instructors, this means being culturally responsive as an educator, with the understanding that this approach will

benefit every student. Drexel University School of Education espouses similar philosophies, promoting on their website that “creating greater multicultural awareness and inclusion help students with different backgrounds and needs succeed, but it encourages acceptance and helps prepare students to thrive in an exponentially diverse world.” [3]

The Benefits of DEI

Increased Intercultural and Cross-Racial Knowledge, Understanding, and Empathy

One of the leading proponents of DEI has been the Century Foundation. According to their website, the institution is a progressive, nonpartisan think tank that seeks to foster opportunity and reduce inequality. They assert that there is “robust social science evidence on the positive relationship between student body diversity and academic outcomes.” [4] They go on to argue “there is a similarly impressive body of research supporting the correlation between campus and classroom diversity and an enhanced ability of students to exhibit interracial understanding, empathy, and an ability to live with and learn from people of diverse backgrounds.” [4] The institution sites the amicus brief filed by Brown and other elite universities in the Fisher II case that asserts “diversity encourages students to question their assumptions, to understand that wisdom may be found in unexpected voices, and to gain an appreciation of the complexity of today’s world.” [4] Other research they reference includes analyses of “how racially diverse educational settings are effective in reducing prejudice, by promoting greater contact between students of different races—both informally and in classroom settings—and by encouraging relationships and friendships across group lines.” [4]

Better Preparation for Employment in the Global Economy

Nearly half of the Fortune 100 companies, among them Apple, Johnson & Johnson, and Starbucks, presented a brief (APA) that argued the essentials to success in a global economic market: it requires hiring highly trained employees of all races, religions, cultures, and economic backgrounds. They further mentioned that “all of their university-trained employees enter the workforce with experience in sharing ideas, experiences, viewpoints, and approaches with diverse groups of people.” [5]

Business leaders posset that the aforementioned cross-cultural skills are a “business and economic imperative,” given the growing diversification of the national and global economies. Understanding these critical components to business success, companies assert that college graduates should be equipped with creative problem-solving approaches to integrate a variety of perspectives that take them beyond just linear, conventional thinking. Students who have benefitted from DEI environments often have skills sets that increase their ability to work productively with diverse business partners, employees, and clients in the U.S. and global marketplace; and they are “likely to generate a more positive work environment by decreasing incidents of discrimination and stereotyping.” [5]

Strong leadership skills are also enhanced by diverse educational environments. Students develop better people-skills, preparing them to work in environments where there is a diversification in race, ethnicities, and culture. A longitudinal study found that “the more often first-year college students are exposed to diverse educational settings, the greater their gains in leadership skills, psychological well-being, intellectual engagement, and intercultural effectiveness.” [5] Moreover, the APA brief argues, in addition to apparent academic pursuits, colleges and universities also equip students to be “effective economic and political leaders on local, national, and global levels. Effective leadership begins with prejudice reduction.” [5]

Developing Civic-mindedness and Consciousness

And finally, the brief asserts that “students’ experiences in diverse classrooms can provide the kind of cross-cultural dialogue that prepares them for citizenship in a multifaceted society.” [6] Students develop civic-mindedness as it relates to democratic participation; and they are more inclined to civic engagement, such as becoming involved in community activities, as a result of their diverse learning experiences. The report sites “one meta-analysis synthesized twenty-seven studies on the effects of diversity on civic engagement and concluded that college diversity experiences are, in fact, positively related to increased civic engagement.” [6]

Effective Approaches to DEI in the classroom

There are a myriad of ways educators and administrators can work to ensure that both the classroom environment and curriculum are diversity-centered and sensitive to the cultural representation of American society. The following strategies are offered by Drexel University School of Education and can be a template to encourage cultural awareness in our learning environments, respecting the personal voice of each student while enhancing their sense of identity, and building classroom community through fostering inclusivity. These strategies have been implemented at Columbia College Chicago, and other institutions of higher education, where DEI has been made a central component of the curriculum.

Get to Know Your Students

As the instructor, your leadership becomes the model by which others will likely pattern their behavior in the classroom. Professors should prioritize understanding each individual student; this is the beginning steps to promoting cultural awareness in the classroom. Devote some time to learning something about individual student’s cultural background, their hobbies, their learning styles, and certainly, anything that makes them unique. The dividends the professor—and all students—will reap is the establishment of trust; this is the beginning to forming a bond, as each individual student feels equally valued. If students feel respected and appreciated by their professor, there’s an increased likelihood the student will feel comfortable communicating with—and respecting—their peers in the class. Effective communication is the critical ingredient to cultural sensitivity and awareness, and a sense of inclusion in the classroom community.

Maintain Consistent Communication

Good communication should continue to be a priority. Professors should make a consistent effort to maintain communication with their students for the duration of the semester and academic year. Scheduling one-to-one conferences is a standard practice for students in each course offered at Columbia College Chicago. This is an excellent opportunity to ensure the instructor's accessibility while engaging in individual communication with each student. That said, mini-conferences or drop-ins can also be managed, and don't have to be limited to faculty office hours. While each of us may still be recovering from the infamous Zoom-fatigue, video chats remain a good option to extend meeting invitations to your students. Student conferences don't have to be strictly about course work and student performance; additionally, meetings can be an opportunity to discuss whether the student feels included in the classroom culture. This thread of conversation can help identify difficulties, issues, or inspire ideas to improve the overall course experience.

Respect Each Student and Acknowledge Who They Are

An important aspect of DEI centered work in colleges and universities is motivating individual student's appreciation for their own cultural histories. Students should be encouraged to celebrate and respect their diversity, and the diversity of other's. This can be accomplished through course work, when appropriate. For example, research assignments are given in Columbia's literature seminar classes where students investigate their own ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This provides an opportunity for each student's personal cultural enrichment and permits them to showcase their work in the classroom community. The research can be used for students to speak about their family traditions, cultural practices, and the like. This is an excellent way for students to become more deeply acquainted and to nurture the sense of community in the classroom. We have observed that students feel recognized, as they gain a better or deeper understanding of their own culture; moreover, the exercise serves to enhance their appreciation and respect for their peers' uniqueness. Acknowledging these differences and creating a safe community space for discussion encourages respect and civility that can extend beyond the classroom. Also, as students learn about diverse backgrounds it presents an opportunity to highlight what's offensive and the distinction between cultural celebration and appropriation. Learning how to respectfully communicate with and about people from other cultures is essential for success beyond the university experience.

Act with Cultural Sensitivity

Certainly, it is important to encourage open dialogue and the exchange of ideas amongst students; however, it's equally as important to make certain that we, as instructors, are being sensitive to the everyone's culture, beliefs, and language concerns. It's important that we educate ourselves on each student's cultural nuances, that includes learning styles to language dynamics. This can provide helpful insights that can be used to inform lesson plans.

Consider creating assignments that require more student interaction and collaboration, rather than the traditional lecture-based style of teaching. These varied approaches to teaching will help encourage student engagement and increase the students' sense of inclusion. Student success increases when they are given the opportunity and space to learn in their own way.

Incorporate Diversity in the Lesson Plan

Cultural awareness can be promoted in the classroom environment, but it's also important that diversity representation, reflective of the cultural composition of the students in the classroom, are also included in the actual lesson plan. From my own experience teaching literature seminars, books are selected that reflect student ethnicities in the classroom. Students appreciate reading works by authors and stories that are relatable to their cultural point of view. The impact on student engagement is always noteworthy, in this context. Students are more apt to pay attention, and to share their thoughts and observations on what's read. There is an inherent permission student feel when writers who look like them are read, and stories that reflect their personal human experience are given attention in the broadest, most respectful way in discourse.

Other approaches may include, for example, widening a study of history that includes a world view beyond western culture; or perhaps integrating analogies in lectures that include references to other cultures. For those students who are from diverse cultures, this approach may help them personally connect. Another consideration is to invite guest speakers from diverse backgrounds to the class to share various points of view, and to give life-experience texture to the subjects being taught. Regardless of the subject, it is important to have lessons that reflect real-world issues, and when possible and appropriate, lessons that are relatable to the cultural population of students in the classroom. Without question, achieving DEI objectives and promoting cultural awareness within course assignments are more easily achieved when there's a real example for students to relate to.

Permit Students to Exercise Freedom and Flexibility

As we discussed and planned to re-design some of the existing courses at Columbia to be more DEI centered, one strong consideration has been to vary the management approach of the classroom. Students learn differently and sometimes possess contrasting skill sets or strengths, as compared to others in the classroom. This requires that professors give thought to the valuable lessons that can be learned through the student's own experience. Simply put, giving students some creative freedom in the course can encourage a stronger connection with the course agenda. Consider permitting students to read and respond to their own chosen material (approved by the professor) that relates to the lesson objectives, thereby giving students the opportunity to explore options that appeal to their individual curiosities.

The instructor can assume the role of facilitator and encourage healthy discourse involving various opinions. Group assignments are also another option to invite a range of student perspectives, allowing them to work

together to explore and exchange ideas on a select topic. The benefit to this activity is that it serves as preparation for the students' role in a diverse workforce, wherein they'll have to partner and collaborate with a range of people to accomplish tasks.

Outcomes of DEI in the College and University Classrooms

Culturally based teaching strategies are crucial to the enhanced learning experience for all students, regardless of their ethnicities, with immediate benefits that can have long-term impact.

Students Learn Empathy

Encouraging awareness and respect for diverse points of view, as well as promoting a personal connection with various cultures in the classroom can inhibit impulses of prejudices later in life. They learn to empathize with people different from themselves, having been encouraged to engage others who may have life experiences that are unlike their own.

Students Gain a Better Understanding of People and Lessons

As a result of a classroom environment where working and learning with people from various backgrounds and cultures were encouraged, students are afforded an enhanced understanding of the subject matter. Additionally, students learn how to utilize their own developing skill sets, strengths, and points of view to add contributive value in a diverse working environment.

Students Become More Open-minded

Open-mindedness is an important benefit student gain from having been exposed to a variety of opinions, unique from their own, other people's thoughts, and various cultural backgrounds. Students grow to become more receptive to new ideas and be able to attain a broader comprehension on a topic by considering different points of view.

Student Confidence Increases

Students who learn about and are exposed to different cultures during their academic training gain a comfort level and feel safe with these differences later in life. This permits them to comfortably engage and interact in a broader social spectrum with self-confidence as they interact with others.

Students Develop Skill Sets That Better Prepare Them for Diversity in the Workplace

With the increase of globalization, the importance of being able to work successfully with people of diverse cultures and backgrounds is also on the rise. Students who are exposed to diversity in academic settings and learn cultural awareness in the classroom are better equipped for success in the workforce.

Conclusion

DEI centered teaching fosters inclusion, awareness, and human respect. Taking a culturally responsive approach to teaching benefits all students. Multicultural awareness in the classroom bolsters the success of students with different backgrounds and needs, but it also encourages acceptance and contributes to all student preparedness to succeed in an exponentially diverse world. Diversity in and out of the university classroom will continue to expand; therefore, it's expedient that we, as educators and leaders, prepare students for the evolving world and teach them to respect those who are different from themselves.

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