Educating for a Changing World: The Importance of an Equity Mindset

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Abstract

Our nation's colleges and universities are being asked to play demanding roles in creating the capacity for active and engaged collaboration and collective action to address complex challenges that are shaping the world we live in. An essential ingredient of any effort to build healthy communities for any purpose, including education, is the cultivation of equity and inclusion. In this article, we discuss what these terms mean in practice and how to draw upon the talents and experiences of all the members of a diverse community in order to understand and address the pressing social, cultural, economic, and environmental challenges we face in our communities and around the globe.

Colleges and universities are seeking "to understand in practical ways the relationship among leadership, adaptation, systems and change" itself (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linksy 2009, 13) and to sort out how best to address the pressing social, cultural, economic, and environmental challenges of today's world through both our approach to education and through the explorations and discoveries made by the members of our campus community. As in the case of any other complex and multifaceted issue, this effort will require profound change within our institutions.

To move toward a truly inclusive and equitable educational system, colleges and universities must build new capacity to work collaboratively, both on campus and in cooperation with community organizations and groups. To support collective action to address large societal challenges, campuses must reframe their boundaries and develop a culture of engagement that promotes collective action across fields (Ramaley 2014). In doing so, it is important to keep in mind that adaptive responses to complex social problems differ from routine efforts in a number of ways. The most important distinction is that technical problems can be addressed using well-established strategies and know-how while adaptive challenges can be managed only through "changes in people's priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties" (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linksy 2009, 19). It is this latter point that is most crucial in rethinking the role and impact of colleges and universities in a nation experiencing rapidly changing demographics.

Educational institutions that are able to prepare their graduates for life in the twenty-first century have discovered that "caring and competence, equity and excellence, and social and economic development" are not mutually exclusive terms. In fact, they must be balanced in order to generate new forces for growth and development (Fullan 1993, 3). For this to become possible, educational institutions must recognize that they, alone among society's institutions, have the potential to help others deal with this kind of

change. To do so, they must reflect deeply on their moral purpose and their role as change agents. Most importantly, they must consider what kind of change is most needed and then set themselves to the task of making that happen in their own campus environments in order to create a working context for learning how to work together to address the complex challenges of today's world.

Disagreements about the role and purpose of our educational institutions and how we should prepare ourselves and our students to thrive in the context of the complex challenges of today's world are playing out in an environment increasingly shaped by tensions around issues of difference, including questions of race, ethnicity, and culture. We are still arguing about what it means to be educated and what we expect of college graduates. We still disagree about whether our goal is primarily to prepare competent workers to support our economy or to provide our students with the knowledge and skills they will need to lead healthy, responsible, productive, and creative lives in a future world we can only dimly imagine. Is our goal to create sustainable communities and a healthy democracy? Should the primary measure of educational success be the jobs that graduates obtain right out of college or the quality of the educational experience they receive and their ability to ask good questions and work on "unscripted problems" or both (Ramaley 2013)?

We no longer think we should adjust educational opportunities on the basis of the likely social roles that our students will play, but we continue to argue about what kind of education we should offer for all. What are the best indicators of the productivity and quality of our educational system? Policymakers and community leaders focus more on preparing graduates for jobs in our changing economy. Educators are more likely to think about what it means to be educated and the impact of learning on our society and our democratic way of life. Most of us still believe that a good education is a key to the future and that education is an essential tool in nation building, but we have different ways to describe what our graduates need to know and to be able to do (Ramaley 2015a, 2015b). We also have concerns about who is succeeding in our current system and who is not and why.

Our challenge is to develop a mindset in which a diversity of backgrounds and experiences and ways of thinking about the world and responding to challenges can be seen as a necessary condition for achieving excellence. This belief, accompanied by new working relationships, values, and skills that draw upon diverse perspectives will be essential if we are to educate a nation and participate in community building through collective impact models (Hanleybrown, Kania, and Kramer 2012).

A growing number of colleges and universities are undertaking the task of responding to complex societal challenges, and their experiences offer some guidance as others undertake the profound changes that will accompany our efforts to become working models of collective action and impact. For example, the participants in the American College and University Climate Commitment are seeking to contribute to our understanding of climate change while promoting the education and research needed to generate solutions and demonstrate the utility of those solutions in their own campus

operations. Leading such profound change is difficult. As a resource document prepared to assist campus leadership in undertaking this path indicates, "The climate commitment agenda requires an effective alignment of campus operation, research, and education and campus-community collaboration in order to create an environment that supports the kinds of creative solutions needed" (American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment 2009). Put succinctly, so does the challenge of promoting equity and inclusion and meaningful participation in all aspects of our institutions.

An essential ingredient of any effort to build healthy communities for any purpose including education is the cultivation of *equity and inclusion*. What do such terms mean in practice, and how can we employ organizational change strategies to achieve them? While aspirations alone cannot lead to the changes we seek in our curriculum, our research mission, and in our relationships with society at large, if we hold ourselves to high standards "and strive to live them out," our efforts will take on a form different from others that lack such ideals (Hamann 2014, 15).

As a society, we are increasingly concerned about the disparities in educational attainment and "degrees of inequality" (Mettler 2014) that separate successful students from those who fail to complete high school or college. Various explanations have been offered for our current condition, and various strategies are being applied to the task of addressing these disparities. Mettler (2014) focuses on the question of how we have gone in a single generation from being the best-educated society on the globe to being surpassed by an increasing number of other nations. Her explanation focuses on how the changing political environment and increasingly divisive partisanship have undermined our historic effort to provide an excellent education for all. As she argues,

> The critics are correct that the United States faces a higher education crisis today, but they miss the mark in identifying what it is. Contrary to the claim that we have a glut of college graduates, in fact we are not producing enough. Even more troubling, our system of higher education is exacerbating inequity in the United States in multiple ways (Mettler 2014, 20).

Mettler (2014) argues that financial aid policies crafted in earlier decades should be revisited and adapted to conditions in today's society if they are to make college affordable for all students. While a more conducive policy environment is certainly needed to provide a supportive context for the role and purposes of higher education and to make education accessible for all, there is a great deal more that must be done to prepare educational institutions to function effectively in a changing world and to create inclusive and equitable learning environments.

Building Excellence through Diversity

It is expected that by the year 2020, minority students will account for 45 percent of the nation's public high school graduates (Chronicle of Higher Education 2014, 2). The rapid growth in the diversity of the students currently attending K-12 highlights

our need to prepare our colleges and universities to become supportive educational environments for an increasingly diverse group of students, and by doing so, to create ways for society to more broadly build communities that are equitable and inclusive. That future is already here on some campuses where students of color now constitute the new majority in their entering undergraduate classes (Schreiner 2014).

Diversity will take many racial, cultural, and economic forms. We must learn to think in new ways both about what it means to be educated and find ways to draw upon the strengths of many cultural differences. Those differences represent untapped assets in our society today that will be needed if we are to increase our capacity to address the large, complex, and "wicked" problems (Camillus 2008) that we are facing today. According to Rittel and Webber (1973), these kinds of wicked problems cannot be definitively defined; they continue to change as we study them; the choice of an appropriate response or solution is never clear-cut; there is little if any room for trial and error; every problem is essentially unique; every problem is tangled up with other issues and may be a symptom of a larger, more complex challenge; and there isn't much margin for error in understanding the issues and in choosing strategies for handling the problem because every choice creates new problems of its own. Most of our pressing social, economic, and environmental problems behave in this manner.

In an essay in *Diversity Perspectives*, Charles Green (2014) offers helpful insights into the challenge of working with what he calls *marginalized students*. He describes what happened after an incident of racial bias on the campus of the University of the Free State in South Africa in 2007. In response, the new rector, Jonathan Jansen, launched a number of steps to make his university more inclusive. In doing so, he operated on two core premises about the realities of race. As Green explains it,

> The first is understanding and respecting cultural difference. We have roots in different places, differences that are amplified by pervasive segregation, and we need to learn how to communicate effectively and respectfully with one another. The second dimension is access to power and resources. The United States is highly stratified by race and our life opportunities vary sharply by the racial or cultural groups to which we belong (Green 2014, 11).

Green (2014, 12) goes on to issue an important challenge that will be consuming our efforts throughout our college and university system over the next decade.

> Is it possible to follow Jonathan Jansen's lead in our own colleges? To strive for representative leadership? To incorporate the history, traditions, and values of many groups into our curriculum? To develop a strong community that affirms both common goals and diverse perspectives? To embed inclusion into our daily lives and continuing efforts, abandoning the hope that a one-time fix will suffice?

Creating an Inclusive
Campus Culture and Environment

The challenge posed by Charles Green (2014) has a number of interlocking components. Every collective effort designed to draw upon the talents, energies, and experiences of a large group of people must address how people interact and work together. There is no simple way to foster a productive and creative community capable of recognizing and responding to challenges as they emerge. There is, however, good evidence that the ingredients needed for collaboration include support structures, habits of mind, well-developed working relationships, and an ability to learn through exchanges with people different from oneself.

In a recent article about collective impact, Hanleybrown, Kania, and Kramer (2012) discuss the basic elements that must be put in place in order to support and promote collaborative work that draws upon a number of individuals and organizations to address a complex problem of importance to all of the participants. These elements are (1) the creation of a shared agenda based on a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to resolving it, (2) shared measurement of the effort and the outcomes conducted through consistent data collection and interpretation among all the participants, (3) an agreement to bring distinctive resources to the project while designing a complementary and mutually reinforcing plan of action that builds additional strength both within each partner and in the collective as a whole, (4) consistent and open communication that builds trust and ensures mutual objectives and motivation, and (5) a backbone support structure that holds the entire effort together and provides coordination of effort.

At the heart of any collaborative approach to change, however, is the "soft stuff" that makes any collective change effort within an organization or amongst organizations possible. These softer elements are "relationship and trust building among diverse stakeholders, leadership identification and development, and creating a culture of learning" (Hanleybrown, Kania, and Kramer 2012, 8). This important social glue can be found in successful projects of all kinds that focus on seemingly very different goals.

Consider, for example, the culture that has developed at CERN, the European Organization for Nuclear Research, a remarkable community of physicists and engineers who are probing the fundamental structure of the universe (Hamann 2014). CERN was founded in 1954 and sits on the Franco-Swiss border near Geneva. It is a joint venture of twenty-one member states. In his article about the discovery of the Higgs boson, Hartman explores "one of the most important advances in physics in the past half century" (Hartman 2015, 1). So who was the genius who discovered the Higgs boson? The answer is that despite the fact that Peter Higgs and Francois Englery and Robert Brout shared a Nobel Prize for this discovery in 2013, the existence of the Higgs boson could not have been proven without "those who directed billions of dollars in investment and thousands of physicists, engineers, and students from almost forty countries over three decades" (p. 2). What we are seeing here is the emergence of

the increasingly collaborative nature of modern scientific inquiry and the contrast between our tendency to award the honors for discovery to a few while ignoring the supporting cast of people and organizations that made the discovery possible (Hamann, 2014).

The remarkable long-term collaboration that unfolded at CERN was made possible by the social structure of CERN itself and its network of contributing members. Experimentalists today depend on an army of engineers and technicians who keep the equipment functioning and the network of checks and balances in analyzing extraordinary volumes of data that must be combed through to find the signature pattern that reveals the presence of the sought after physical entity, in this case a Higgs boson. "Roughly one hundred physicists were involved in the analysis of a single and relatively straightforward particle signature, the decay of the Higgs into two gamma particles. The overall analysis was performed by a team of more than six hundred physicists," (Hamann 2014, 6) all of whose names appear on every CERN publication.

A college or university campus collects together an even larger community of people than the ones associated with CERN, each playing a role in building and operating an educational institution every day. When these people have bonds of trust and an ability to create a sense of common purpose while retaining their own distinctive interests and concerns, a vital and engaging collective effort can emerge in which education and discovery can thrive. The institution and its faculty, staff, students, and alumni can participate in collaborations both within the context of the institution and in cooperation with members of the broader society with which the campus is affiliated. We are moving away from phrases like "the wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki 2004) to a more refined concept of "collective intelligence" that can explain why some groups of people perform especially well on a range of tasks. Woolley et al. (2010) demonstrated in a study involving 699 people working in groups of various sizes that the overall intelligence and creativity of a group was correlated not with the IQs of its members but rather with "the average social sensitivity of group members, the equality in distribution of conversational turn-taking, and the proportion of females in the group (Woolley et al. 2010, 686). While the groups were too small in number to allow for a study of the impact of race or socioeconomic status on the collective intelligence and solution-finding ability of these groups, it is reasonable to speculate that the likelihood of success of any collaborative effort will be affected by how well people work together across various aspects of difference, including race, economic status, cultural and ethnic backgrounds, and experience.

The Need for Equity-Mindedness

To create the core conditions for effective collective impact described by Hanleybrown and her colleagues (2012), we will need to cultivate trust through developing the capacity to learn from differences. Until we manage this, we will continue to draw from only a portion of the talent base and creativity of our communities. Collective intelligence appears only to emerge when the "soft stuff" is present. To open up new pathways to collaboration, we need to develop a habit of *equity-mindedness*. The term

equity-mindedness addresses the beliefs that administrators, faculty, and students have about the intelligence and capability of people from different backgrounds and the impact that those beliefs have on whether students will be successful (Dweck 2010).

Equity-mindedness also influences how alternative ideas and values will be understood and taken into account in studying and then responding to shared problems. In a series of studies on biases that affect the functioning of the criminal justice system, Jennifer Eberhardt studied the effects of unconscious racial bias on the behavior of police and the criminal justice system (Dreifus 2015). Recent incidents in which black suspects were killed at the hands of police officers in Missouri and New York have led to increasing interest in Eberhardt's work. Among many helpful observations, Eberhardt has shown that the failure to be able to read someone else's facial expressions and body language can lead to "a psychological distance that makes it difficult to understand the experiences of another group." The unconscious way that racial differences affect understanding differs in important ways from "old-fashioned racism" (Dreifus 2015, 2). Although the term *racism* is used to cover many attitudes and behaviors, a useful approach for our purpose is to define racism as "a belief or doctrine that inherent differences among the various human racial groups determine cultural or individual achievement, usually involving the idea that one's own race is superior and has the right to dominate others" (Dictionary.com 2015).

Schreiner (2014) has studied the factors that contribute to the ability of students of different backgrounds to thrive and succeed in higher education. She places a special emphasis on individuals from groups that have not historically been well represented in higher education and who continue, on average, to do less well than their Caucasian or Asian counterparts. She offers a practical demonstration of equity-mindedness and why one size cannot fit all if we are to help our students become "intellectually, socially, and psychologically engaged" in their own learning and to build connections with the campus community (Schreiner 2014, 10). Schreiner identifies five elements that contribute to the capacity to thrive: (1) engaged learning, (2) academic determination, (3) social connectedness, (4) diverse citizenship, and (5) a positive perspective. A student who is thriving "is engaged in the learning process, invests effort to reach important educational goals, manages time and commitments effectively, connects in healthy ways to other people, is optimistic about the future and able to reframe negative events as temporary setbacks, is appreciative of differences in others, and is committed to enriching his or her community" (Schreiner 2014, 11).

Others who are studying the phenomenon of thriving and success also identify a growth perspective that affects whether students or their instructors think that intelligence is fixed or whether intelligence can grow through additional learning and experience (Dweck 2010). The presence of a growth perspective certainly contributes to the qualities that Schreiner associates with thriving. In exploring the experiences of students from different groups, Schreiner learned that the pathways to thriving in college differ in accordance with the self-reported racial identification of the students. In particular, students of color generally identified fewer pathways to success than did white students, especially on predominantly white campuses. Equity-mindedness can

be informed by these findings and by observations about what contributes to a sense of belonging and what other factors in a student's life can support or detract from the opportunity to pursue a pathway to success.

An especially important way to engage the talents of everyone is to foster a sense of community on campus. The goal is to move toward offering everyone a sense of ownership and avenues for full participation in the community that make up a campus. According to Schreiner (2014), the feeling of citizenship in a community entails having a voice, being heard, and having positive relationships, and social capital. These assets are generated by meaningful participation in some aspect of campus life, whether it is in a classroom, a research project, a community project, or a student group. Here, as in other aspects of thriving in college, the experiences that lead to a sense of community differ across socioeconomic lines and reinforce the importance of developing many ways for members of a community to contribute and to draw strength and support from community life. To foster this concept of collective impact on a campus, administrators, faculty, staff, and student leaders are developing a habit of thinking in different ways, redesigning how they facilitate learning, and how they interact with each other. Equity-mindedness is an essential mindset to develop and to use as campuses work out ways to turn their growing diversity into academic excellence and a sense of community. As a campus community becomes more equity-minded, questions like those posed by Green (2014) will become answerable. Some of the questions awaiting our attention are

1. What does inclusive leadership mean?

2. How do students from different ethnic groups connect to a campus community, and what can a campus do to provide a more inclusive sense of community and belonging?

3. What does it mean to experience diversity, and what role do various pedagogical strategies play in ensuring student learning and success?

4. How can an institution incorporate the history, traditions, and values of many groups into its community?

5. What constitutes a genuine affirmation of both common goals and diverse perspectives?

6. What role can engagement with the broader society play in building a strong and equitable community on a campus and within its programs?

7. What can be the role of higher education in addressing the growing racial tension in this nation today and how can we create a more equitable nation through education, scholarship, and community partnerships?

Summary

As the nation grows more diverse, our higher education institutions will have new opportunities to create working models of sustainable communities in which individual experiences and values can be respected while the community as a whole works toward a sense of common purpose. Efforts to create a sense of community and common purpose through collective action depend upon the ability to draw from many points of view and experiences and to find common ground through the development of an equity mindset. As our nation enters a new era that will depend upon effective community building, colleges and universities will play new and meaningful roles in creating the capacity for active and engaged collaboration and collective action to address complex challenges that will shape the world we live in now and in the future.

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