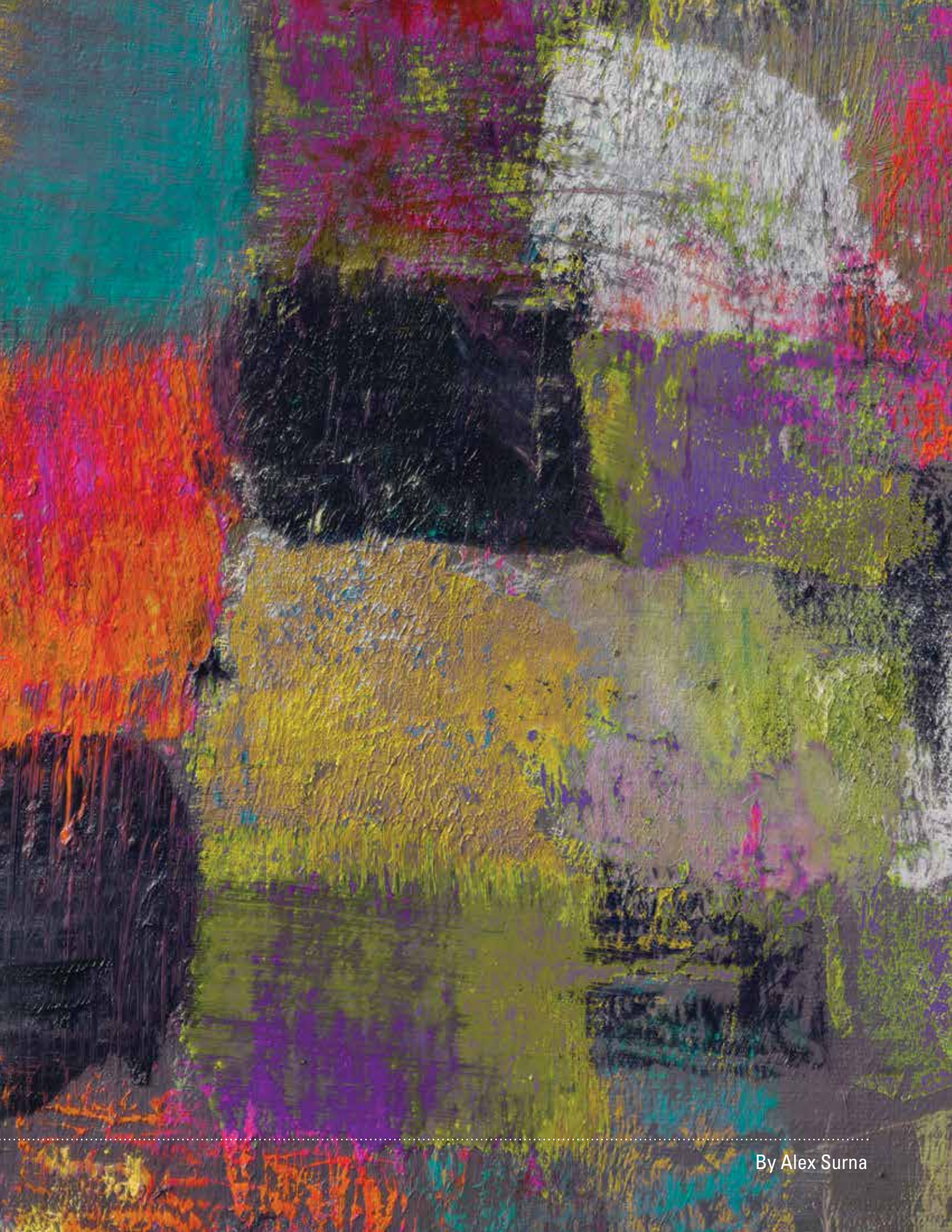


Equitable
Representation
among People of
Color and Women
in Higher Ed



By Alex Surna

I sat in the second row—the first row scared me. I looked around. Oak adorned the ceiling, the bright California sunlight came through the stained-glass, and 400 undergraduates sat intently, and waiting for the first lecture of our class to begin. My stomach fluttered, I could feel the warmth that started on my face creep down my back. Almost everyone had a laptop. I didn't.

I scanned the room for students like me. Only a small handful were people of color and even those faces didn't look much like the ones I played baseball with in my predominately low-income, Latino community in southern California. In front of me, two students chatted about recent vacation to Napa. I was suddenly very aware of my lack of computer and my well-worn, secondhand outfit, and wondered if the college had made a mistake admitting me.

As a first-generation person of color who comes from an immigrant background, my experience is not unique. In classrooms, university administrative boardrooms, faculty offices, and admission buildings that same feeling of not belonging happens more often than we sometimes concede.

By and large the United States is not even close to having equitable representation among people of color and women in higher ed—both as students and as institutional leaders. In a 2016 study, NACAC, in collaboration with AACRAO, gathered information from 559 institutional chief admission officers to better understand their career paths and roles in the enrollment management field. Of those who participated in the study, only 15 percent identified as non-white. The American Council on Education presents similar inequities associated with college president roles, with a mere 17 percent of individuals identifying as racial or ethnic minorities. Regarding the status of women, great strides have undoubtedly been made in the educational field; however, they continue to significantly trail men with regard to career advancement opportunities. In the article "Women Leaders within Higher Education in the United States: Supports, Barriers, and Experiences of Being a Senior Leader," researchers note that few women reach the senior-most leadership levels. Even more concerning, among women of color, the number is proportionally lower. The American Association of University Women report on women in leadership highlights similar disparities.

When focusing specifically on admission, NACAC's 2014 *Career Paths* report shows that women and minority racial/ethnic groups are underrepresented in key segments of the admission profession. Although women comprised 59 percent of all college undergraduates, they represent 53 percent of directors of admission and only 40 percent of vice presidents/deans of admission or enrollment management. Non-whites are underrepresented at all points on the admission career trajectory, and the issue only becomes more pronounced at higher position levels.

According to the Pew Research Center, the US is only going to get more diverse in the coming decade. Additionally, women are solidly represented in the workforce. Seven years ago, Pew found that mothers were the sole or primary breadwinner in a record 40 percent of all households with children. *The Wall Street Journal* and other news sources have put forward polls that estimate that 50 percent of women are breadwinners today... but how many of them are CEOs, college presidents, or other leadership positions? You know the answer.

Why is this important for higher ed? Representative leadership and resulting student success are deeply connected to the overall health of a school.

To frame our exploration of representation, diversity, and inclusion (RDI) in higher education, keep in mind these three points:

- **Equity and equality aren't the same.** Equality is granting that everyone has the same opportunity; equity recognizes from the onset that the pathway to attaining that opportunity isn't the same for all.
- **RDI is complicated, multifaceted, and nuanced.** It relates to increasing the number of women or people of color in higher education leadership positions, but going more deeply, it's about where you can have all that and create an inclusive environment among various groups, so they can experience a real sense of belonging.
- **RDI isn't a zero-sum game.** It is a win-win when novel experiences and ideas spur innovation. It is a win-win when students feel understood and connected. It is a win-win when institutions sufficiently reflect the citizenry. Most prominently, it is a win-win when everyone has a chance at the American Dream.

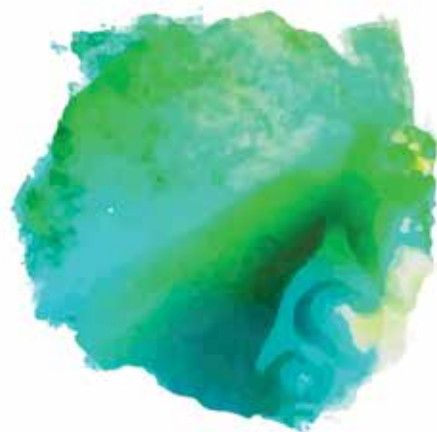
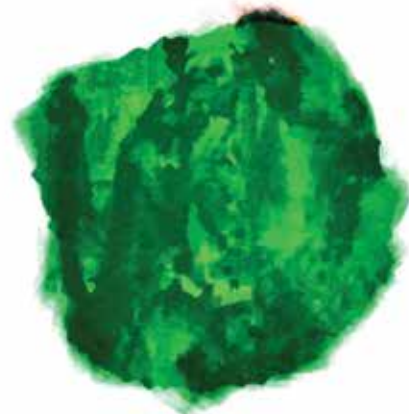
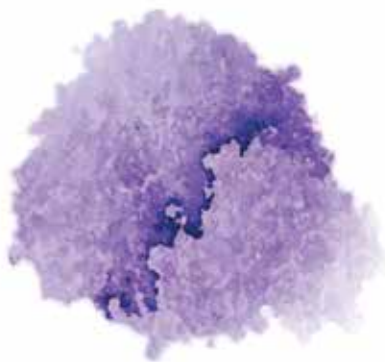
...a more diverse group often yields more nuanced decisions. Fully deliberated decisions made from multiple perspectives and experiences result in deeper and wider considerations of ever-changing students, schools, and the world at large.

REPRESENTATIVE LEADERSHIP

At the most senior leadership levels in institutions of higher education decisions are being made every day that dramatically influence the student, faculty, and staff experience.

Who are those higher ed leaders? A recent study by NewSchools Venture Fund, *Unrealized Impact: The Case of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*, found that "white leaders and staff members are overrepresented while other racial/ethnic groups are underrepresented" with executive teams being 68 percent white, CEOs 74 percent white, and boards 64 percent white.

The problem with this is, even among the most well-meaning, a homogeneous team comes with a limited outlook, whereas a more





diverse group often yields more nuanced decisions. Fully deliberated decisions made from multiple perspectives and experiences result in deeper and wider considerations of ever-changing students, schools, and the world at large.

The Campaign for College Opportunity's recent report, *Left Out: How Exclusion in California's Colleges and Universities Hurts Our Values, Our Students, and Our Economy*, notes that, "racially and gender diverse college leaders and faculty are key to improving success for all students," providing a tremendous effect on student self-efficacy, learning, and success.

The challenge is to include all voices at all levels of leadership. Colleges need audacious, creative, and concerted approaches to recruit, retain, and elevate more women and people of color in those positions. Here are a few ideas:

- **Create a conference.** Regis University (CO) is focusing on leadership development, mentorship, and purposeful guidance to elevate more women into senior administrative positions. It held a Women and Leadership Conference this past March focused on how women, who hold more positions of power than ever before, still struggle to be recognized as strong leaders.
- **Create a community.** Salve Regina University's (RI) Female Empowerment Organization—which unites female students with female college professionals—cultivates a community of support for women and collaborates with other organizations to "form a community of

support for one another against the injustices so many groups of people have suffered in today's society."

- **Create connections.** At the University of California–Berkeley they are focusing on increasing the number of mid-level administrators from underrepresented minority backgrounds who enter senior administrative positions. A cohort-based program includes sponsorship by a senior administrator, workshops on strategic networking, and navigating how the university works.

CHANGING LANDSCAPE

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, "increasing numbers and percentages of Black and Hispanic students are attending college. Between 2000 and 2015, the percentage of college students who were Black rose from 11.7 to 14.1 percent, and the percentage of students who were Hispanic rose from 9.9 to 17.3 percent." While the increase in enrollment is a positive, the eventual outcomes continue to be inadequate. According to the Postsecondary National Policy Institute, only 11 percent of first-generation students from low-income backgrounds will graduate from a university after six years—and most of these students are minorities.

Many factors shape the experience of a student of color through the system of higher education: college affordability; life's circumstances; self-efficacy; and most importantly, front line staff like admission representatives.

ADMISSION AND STUDENT SELF-EFFICACY

How did I even get into UC–Berkeley? I was 17 years old when I became a father. And I graduated high school with a 2.1 GPA... but I happened to meet an admission rep who was visiting my community college’s counseling center—and she looked like me. She shared a similar first-generation journey and she believed in me. A year and a half later, I would be sitting in North Gate Hall at Berkeley ready to hear my first college lecture.

The American Psychological Association says self-efficacy is “an individual’s belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviors necessary to produce specific performance attainments... [it] reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one’s own motivation, behavior, and social environment.” My self-efficacy was extremely low until I met Ana and other people of color working in admission and student support services.

Whether it is in outreach or review committees, admission representatives who come from diverse experiences play an impactful role in whether a student from an underrepresented background will even consider applying to their institution.

The relationship between self-efficacy and seeing oneself among those individuals is critical. According to the work of social psychologist Albert Bandura, “seeing people similar to ourselves succeed by their sustained effort raises our beliefs that we too possess the capabilities to master the activities needed for success in that area.”

Whether it is in outreach or review committees, admission representatives who come from diverse experiences play an impactful role in whether a student from an underrepresented background will even consider applying to their institution. Admission offices can create a more equitable opportunity for all students by having diverse admission teams and review committees, and by creating a sense of belonging.

As to the latter, Julio Mata, a senior assistant director for regional enrollment at Miami University (OH), knows the importance of seeing yourself in your future community. When recruiting, he said, “students and families might be receiving support and encouragement from other sources, but it carries a bit more weight when it comes from someone they can identify with, someone they can see themselves in.”

AN ADMISSION PERSPECTIVE



“Having a diverse set of experiences in the admission office is vital. Just as we attempt to build diverse classes of students, we must do the same for our admission and financial aid staff. People of color, first-generation to college, and low-income admission staff members, among many other populations, offer different and important perspectives to consider when reading applications and recruiting students.

Our office is sensitive to considering personal backgrounds and lenses through which prospective admission officers are viewing their work. When we hire new staff members, we continue to engage with one another to choose colleagues who will be able to contribute to these important conversations based on background, education, and personal experiences.

I think this has a tremendously positive impact on our admitted class and current students who work for our office. Just today, our director of multicultural recruitment led an optional brown-bag lunch for admission officers and student workers on structural and institutional racism and its intersection with income and class.

Without intentionally choosing staff members who not only have these perspectives but who are open to learning and confronting their own biases, we would not be able to do the work that’s required of the admission office. It’s just one example of many where our office engages in these difficult conversations, but it shows why diversity of staff matters.”

—Andrew Moe, Associate Dean of Admissions and Director of Access at Swarthmore College (PA)

At the root of increasing RDI is nurturing a sense of belonging and human connection in the campus and surrounding communities. Of course, it’s not just underrepresented groups who benefit. Mata said, when you listen to other’s stories, experiences, and journeys regardless of difference, you grow and learn. If you connect with people from backgrounds other than yours, your perspective broadens. “I hope to see a continued growth in empathy and understanding within higher ed so we can all work together to support underrepresented populations. It takes increased empathy and a desire to understand others to do that,” he said.

Creating an equitable campus—and society—requires work and sacrifice. Two years after my first college lecture, I became the first in my family to graduate and now work in education to support the next generation of students. Change is here, the question is, what are we going to do with it? [🔗](#)

Alex Surna is the program director and incoming executive director for Breakthrough San Juan Capistrano. He also serves on the Millennial Policy Initiative Commission on Education.