

Examining the Challenges Making Excellence Inclusive

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Abstract

The term Inclusive Excellence (IE) is being applied to many efforts in higher education to address past exclusionary practices. IE is more than a term, it is a vision of what could be. It is a deliberate set of actions to ensure that all students, especially those who have historically been underserved by the fragmented attempts in higher education to address the disparities in student learning outcomes. Readers are expected to learn about strategies to genuinely make excellence inclusive to address existing inequities in education.

Keywords: inclusive, excellence; collaboration, equity, broad

Introduction

Following the national news makes it clear that discrimination and injustice are alive and well in the United States. Witnessing these disturbing trends should raise concerns about the contradictions between our ideals of being one nation and the barriers experienced by many that seek to fully achieving that dream. The stratification of students in our education systems based on race, ethnicity, and gender identity is especially troubling. Many racialized and poor students are too often not afforded a high-quality education, while white and affluent students most often have access to the best. Yet, both are considered public education. This stratified K-12 system of quality is particularly stark due to housing segregation and district-level tax revenues that vary by level of affluence. Such stratification at the postsecondary level is partially a result of limited access to and affordability of quality pre-school education and often lower quality K-12 education.

The reality of continued disparities—that cut along racial, ethnic, gender, and economic lines—denies these communities equitable educational opportunities and outcomes. Researchers have examined the juxtaposition of institutional statements and the lived realities of underserved and marginalized students, faculty, staff, and community members. It will continue to be difficult for people who are marginalized to realize the American dream unless they are equitably afforded a quality education.

Moving the nation closer to making educational excellence inclusive requires experimentation with proven and promising pedagogies that demonstrate effectiveness, robust analysis of efforts made, and examination of implemented pedagogies' breadth, depth, fidelity, and outcomes. Consistent documentation of the elements of equitable practices that produce the positive results observed must then be broadly documented, replicated, and assessed in various institutional contexts. The overall impact of efforts to make excellence inclusive requires examining the depth of our most effective institutional practices and reward structures that broadly entice faculty and professional staff participation. Pockets of excellence exist in institutions, but not often missing is the broad implementation of practices known to have a positive impact on learning, nor aligned and supported with individual, group, and institutional resources. This requires a strong commitment to achieving equitable learning outcomes for all students. Inattention to such action will keep us stuck in the existing paradigm of high-quality K-12 education reserved for those who can afford the best colleges.

It is paramount to acknowledge and effectively address the educational disparities that have been normalized in the United States over decades. If we truly live the liberty and justice for all rhetoric, we must work consistently to overcome these threats to our precious and currently fragile democracy. When we fall short of a full assault on all forms of preconceptions and discrimination that undergirds educational inequities, it fosters continued denial that disparities exist, or worse yet, blame those victimized for their plight. Successfully creating a more perfect

union requires the advantaged to be engaged and to thoughtfully dialogue with those who are historically marginalized. Such engagement requires listening to understand the differences in their lived experiences and working together to address the reality of discrimination of all kinds. Only then can we collectively and equitably ensure the long-term vitality of our nation. This also requires that all who call this nation home have equitable access and opportunities for educational success. The sustainability of our unique democracy depends on having a broadly well-educated citizenry.

Implementing these actions requires that faculty, administrators, and professional staff institution-wide to possess requisite understandings and capabilities to employ practices known to maximize all students' learning. It is common to identify places that engage in the practices listed above. Yet, too often, such practices are only provided to those who have had such advantages throughout their Pre-K-12 education. Limiting such practices only widens existing disparities between students from more and less affluent communities and circumstances. Deepening our collective understanding of this dilemma requires a bit of history about how we arrived where we are today regarding examining potential action steps.

As the 21st-century began, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U)¹ was an 87-year-old organization. While primarily focused on liberal arts colleges, AAC&U purposefully broadened its efforts to expand its reach to include all colleges and universities. It also amplified the need to focus on essential learning outcomes across all student populations, regardless of institutional type. With funding from several enlightened and committed philanthropies, AAC&U began this farsighted endeavor that continues today. It started its work by convening a 25-member panel to examine how to instill greater expectations of student learning outcomes across the spectrum of higher education institutions. As the national panel identified issues critical to raising expectations of faculty and their leaders and students, the disparities across populations were laid bare and screamed to be addressed. The initiative resulted in a 2002 publication *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*². The publication guided the entire education community to raise our collective expectations of all students and offered a foundational plan of action.

As we discussed the next steps to address the observed disparities in student success, we focused on the crisis of broad exclusion of historically underrepresented and underserved students in high-quality learning experiences. We agreed that college learning must be more inclusive of realizing the learning goals for all students articulated in the report. This publication, and many

¹ On January 10, 2022 AAC&U announced a change in its name from the Association of American Colleges and Universities to the American Association of Colleges and Universities, and retained the acronym AAC&U. The rationale is explained on its [website](#).

² This meeting of colleagues included Dr. Caryn Musil, then vice president for the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Global Initiatives; Dr. Edgar Beckham who was then an AAC&U Senior Scholar, but previously a Program Officer at the Ford Foundation; and the Dr. Clayton-Pedersen, then vice president for the Office of Education and Institutional Renewal. The Ford Foundation grant also enabled us to explore what Inclusive Excellence might look like in practice with hundreds of individuals and dozens of campus teams. We engaged attendees in exploring the possibilities at AAC&U regional and annual conferences, summer institutes, and meetings of other projects funded under the Greater Expectations initiative.

AAC&U publications and periodicals that have followed, have had an impact on higher education that remains more than two decades later. Several attempts were made to broaden our vision of what could be and to understand and articulate that inclusion alone is not enough. We needed to focus on enhancing learning outcomes for those who were being left behind and consistently excluded, especially based on race and ethnicity, but also based on gender/gender identity, class, and other dimensions where they were assumed less capable.

After debating approaches, I eventually shouted exuberantly, “What we need is inclusive excellence.” I was excited about both the sound of the phrase and the vision of achieving it. Yet, my colleagues initially argued that excellence was the highest bar and unreasonable to believe that everyone could achieve academically at that level. After an extensive discussion about the term’s appropriateness, I conceded that inclusive excellence appropriately could and should be seen as the learning facilitators’³ aspiration for and contributions to all students’ learning outcomes. Stating explicitly that those guiding students’ learning and development should conduct high-quality observations, provide appropriate resources, and put forth the best teaching practices to engage and advance all students’ knowledge development. Such an effort requires institutions to hold their leaders, faculty, and staff who have a role in guiding student learning, to strive steadfastly to help all learners strive for excellent learning outcomes. This should be viewed with an understanding that this is a pipedream unless there is a significant mindset-shift among administrators, educators, and professional personnel in all spheres of institutional functioning and their students.

I had previously considered how best to increase student learning outcomes during my time at Vanderbilt University by studying student outcomes in a variety of roles: Dean of Student Affairs Office, Assistant Director at its Institute for Public Policy Studies (VIPPS), and Associate Dean for Undergraduate Academic Affairs at Peabody College. Studies conducted at Peabody’s Learning Technology Center were groundbreaking and yielded the publication *How People Learn: Bridging Research and Practice*. This and subsequent work on the learning process has been highly influential in the remainder of my work in higher education.

We titled the AAC&U work *Making Excellence Inclusive* (MEI). Yet, we underscored that inclusive excellence is a striving versus an end goal because future research was likely to indicate the need for changes, as we learned more from identifying and implementing effective structural and educational strategies. As such, striving for excellence requires ongoing shifts in our understanding of learning processes and determining the changes that need to be made for all students to achieve at higher levels. Inclusion requires being mindful of the reality that people learn in many different ways. As such, the title serves three functions:

- 1) Focusing on the actions of institutional leaders and all learning facilitators;

³ The reference to learning facilitators include all institutional personnel who interact with students and contribute to their learning.

- 2) Emphasizing the end goal of IE to spark the imagination of faculty and learners and reject assumptions that only certain students can achieve excellence; and
- 3) Adopting and multiplying teaching practices that are known to assist all students in achieving learning success.

The exploration of setting the bar high for all learners continues today and is persuasively expressed in the articles within this edition of *Metropolitan Universities Journal*. Each piece offers multiple approaches to making excellence inclusive (MEI). Inclusive excellence (IE) focuses broadly on inequities in educational inputs and their outcomes. It is important to point out the disproportionate harm of racial and ethnic discrimination. The pieces in this edition of the *Metropolitan Universities Journal* focus on processes and practices that seek to address and eliminate racism at all levels of education.

The varied approaches provide evidence that there are multiple avenues to eliminate racism by implementing MEI efforts, while also retaining the essential elements of institutional culture that serve as a foundation for their IE goals. Each piece uses different approaches to achieve its MEI vision, and they do so based on research evidence, as well as individual and institutional strategies. The beauty of the chapters is that the authors offer different approaches to MEI. Still, all have the same end goal: to evaluate and examine persistently the strategies undertaken, illuminate their outcomes, and indicate *how* efforts succeed and fail. With such knowledge, implementers can consistently refine promising structures and processes and do so based on robust assessments of the process elements and student learning outcomes. To pursue the goal of inclusive excellence robustly, it must be recognized that it is an evolutionary process that we must continue to pursue.

Progress toward inclusive excellence requires institutional and curriculum-wide approaches that better ensure that all students have access to learning that prepares them for an increasingly complex, 21st-century world. This is particularly relevant in light of what we as a nation have witnessed in the aftermath of the 2020 election and the fight against Covid-19 and its variants.

This includes:

1. Effectively adopting teaching practices known to have a positive impact on learning outcomes (e.g., high impact practices [HIPs⁴]);
2. Broadly implementing equitable teaching practices⁵ (i.e., providing faculty and staff professional development focused on equity-minded approaches that support all students' desire to learn)

⁴ High-impact practices, or HIPs, are active learning practices that promote deep learning by promoting student engagement as measured by the National Survey on Student Engagement (NSSE). To be a high-impact practice, the experience must satisfy the definition established by George Kuh, 2008 and Kuh & O'Donnell, 2013 and colleagues at the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U): achievement of deep learning, significant engagement gains, and positive differential impact on historically underserved student populations.

⁵ It should be recognized that co-curricular activities such as student council service and athletics are also opportunities to make excellence inclusive and should be included in assessing student learning outcomes.

3. Robustly assessing student learning outcomes (e.g. examining student learning outcomes disaggregated by students' entering characteristics such as race/ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status, previous learning versus solely reviewing grades); and
4. Intentionally identifying and exploiting students' previous successes, recognizing and addressing the gaps in their learning because both strategies are needed to build new knowledge (i.e. leverage students' strengths and identify means to overcome the weaknesses).

Conclusion

This volume of the *Metropolitan Universities Journal* offers the education community strategies that advance practices that develop effective learning environments and guide efforts to make excellence inclusive for all students. These pieces provide guidance about the institutional capacities needed to support all students achieving desired learning outcomes at high levels, which positions them for success in their chosen profession.

While there is no specific focus on the tenure advancement processes in this edition, the research presented will inform how teaching is evaluated as part of the steps towards inclusive excellence. The research may advance the teaching component of tenured/tenure-line faculty assessment, particularly at medium to high research institutions. These institutions tend to focus more on research productivity, publications, and presentations at conferences. Such processes focus less on faculty teaching practices and any disparities in impact on student learning outcomes disaggregated by race. Yet, excellence in teaching practices that address disparities in student learning outcomes across racial lines has not historically played a significant role in determining tenure.

Serious attention to effective teaching practices that enhance learning outcomes for all students could expand the collective capacity of the faculty and the institution to graduate a greater number of well-educated students that are better able to demonstrate they are effective critical thinkers, leaders, and life-long learners. When students are exposed to multiple high impact practices (HIPs), research shows a demonstrable impact on student learning outcomes (Kuh, 2008). Students exposed to multiple HIPs will become better-prepared professionals, and they are more likely to be grateful and engaged alumni. Institutional leaders should expect excellence in both teaching and research. This can signal an expectation of equity-mindedness⁶ in research on teaching and learning, and place appropriate value on such skills for promotion at each level.

Staff evaluations tend to focus on the number and types of engagements with students, and outcomes are related to retention. When equity-mindedness is applied to both the curriculum and co-curriculum, we can expect more equitable learning outcomes across the diversity of student

⁶ The Center for Urban Education, defines "Equity-Mindedness" refers to "the perspective or mode of thinking exhibited by practitioners who call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes."

populations. The articles offer individuals and institutions guidance about achieving these ends through cultural, structural, and social embeddedness of equity-minded practices that support such changes. Embeddedness necessarily requires the engagement of a diverse faculty, staff, administration, and student body.

As indicated in this issue, the work to move us closer to inclusive excellence requires experimentation, robust analysis of efforts made, and examination of the breadth, depth, and fidelity of implementation. Efforts to evaluate the overall depth of individual, group, and institutional embeddedness of our efforts require us to document equitable practices robustly and consistently.

While many strides have been made to recognize the contradictions between our espoused ideals of being one nation and the realities of exclusion for many, such exclusion from high-quality education hurts individual students and the nation. The realities of continued disparities that cut along racial, ethnic, gender, and economic lines deny many citizens equal protections and educational opportunities. It is difficult for people who have been marginalized to realize the American dream when these disparities are apparent in higher education. Authors have examined the juxtaposition of institutional statements, and the lived realities of underserved and marginalized students, faculty, staff, and community members.

Fully realizing the American dream requires current and future citizens to develop cultural competence⁷. A nation that deemed itself the United States must do more to make its title an equitably lived reality for all who call it home. We must commit to developing cultural competence across our Pre K-graduate school education systems and make these cognitive and interpersonal skills pervasive—least we run the risk that individuals will fight to have their group’s ideas and ideals dominate. This will create an epidemic of multiple, self-interested groups that may undermine the very ideals of our United States -- one indivisible nation with liberty and justice for all. We can only promote and sustain such an ideal if we understand that we are a nation of Native Americans and people from all other nations. To thrive in such a multi-cultural environment, we need to recognize, understand, and respect one another’s cultural complexities. While doing so, we must also provide means for embracing the differences we each bring to the learning enterprise.

Academic research on inter-racial/cultural interaction has helped us better understand one another and view our differences as important and relevant to our effort to sustain our fragile democracy. Such research has become especially important in light of the existing disparities across various groups and the tensions accompanying them. This requires a better understanding of why Caucasians/whites feel threatened by the many racial and ethnic groups that make up our nation and view demands for equity and equal opportunity as a zero-sum endeavor. The fact is that we must work towards a collective endeavor to protect the best ideals of our nation as a

⁷ While there are several ways to define cultural competence, the author most often offers the following definition which was adapted from the University of Southern California’s Center for Urban Education. *Cultural competence is the state of having and applying knowledge and skill in four areas: a) awareness of one’s own cultural worldview; b) recognition of one’s attitude toward cultural differences; c) a realization of diverse cultural practices and worldviews; and thoughtfulness in cross-cultural interaction. Over an extended period of time individuals and organizations develop the wisdom and capability to: examine critically how cultural worldviews influence perceptions of power, dominance and inequity; and behave honorable within the complex dynamics of differences and commonalities among humans, groups and systems.*

whole. This requires that we all understand the drivers for feelings of being robbed because the nation is becoming more racially and ethnically diverse. Instead, we should all see one another as assets to make our nation stronger. This means we must all understand the positions of others and work to bridge these differences among all who claim the United States as their home. To accomplish the national goals previously outlined, we must understand our diverse population and ensure equitable access to the resources to achieve success in learning, life, and work. Doing so means we must better understand how to address the ills of racism by understanding it in-depth, developing coalitions to challenge the premise that one racial group is better than another based solely on their physicality. We must all work to understand others who are different from ourselves if our goal is to flourish as individuals and as a nation made up of all the nations of the world under one banner of Americans. Again, this requires us to know the cultures that make up our nation, so we have the potential to live prosperously and in peace with one another.

The pieces in this edition of the *Metropolitan Universities Journal* articulates and provides evidence of the racism that exists in our education systems. The pieces also offer strategies that explain various actions we might undertake to make a true reality of the American dream versus the one that exists for some and not others. The journal also offers a description of “What is equity-minded competence” developed by the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California. Finally, the pieces offer ways to measure progress toward achieving these ideals.

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