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PRESPECTIVE

Professional Learning Communities as a Strategy for Enhancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Online Higher Education

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Abstract

In recent years, higher education enrollment has become increasingly diverse, particularly in online programs. Accordingly, institutions are increasingly aware of the importance of retaining these students and supporting them through successful degree/program completion. While there has been substantial declaration of the need for promoting improvement in equity and inclusion, the strategies for effectively achieving this are still lacking or, at best, are in experimental stages. The result is a gap between the acknowledgement of the need for serving diverse students and the culture shift necessary to effectively foster an environment that advances equity and inclusion. While truly achieving equity and inclusion requires a multi-faceted approach, we assert that an under-utilized strategy is the use of faculty-led Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), which aim for incremental transformation of teaching practices through ongoing, inquiry-based learning. Forming and implementing PLCs for cross-discipline faculty of all backgrounds to convene and collaborate on the development of enhanced curriculum and teaching strategies that leverage diversity and prompt equity and inclusion in the classroom can accelerate the culture shift required to truly serve diverse learners.

Keywords: *diversity, equity and inclusion, professional learning communities*

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Enhancing diversity, equity, and inclusion practices in the online classroom is a worthy priority in higher education as we aim to better serve diverse learners. William James (1890) proclaimed that "belonging" is a fundamental human need. As such, experiences of exclusion are in direct opposition to that need and, when individuals feel excluded, they tend to have difficulty re-engaging in later efforts toward inclusion (Polzer & Caruso, 2008). The provision of undergraduate and graduate degrees through an online delivery modality lowers cultural and economic barriers, inviting diverse communities of individuals to join who may otherwise have limited access to on-campus/in-person higher education. As universities shape the culture and mission of their online degree programs, continued action, and progress in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion are essential if leaders are to see their institutional vision actualized. As university leaders continue to prioritize improvement in rates of retention, persistence, and degree completion, deliberate action which considers the educational needs and outcomes for all students is essential.

While strides to promote diversity in higher education have been made in recent decades, desired improvements for diverse learners have been slow to be realized. Research indicates that there is a gap between recognizing the need to better serve diverse student populations and actually achieving it (Byrd 2022; Patton, 2019; Milem, Chang and Antonio, 2005). Milem, Chang, and Antonio (2005), "argue persuasively for a conception of diversity as a process toward better learning rather than as an outcome—a certain percentage of students of color, a certain number of programs—to be checked off a list" (p. IV). Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are an ideal vehicle for actualizing institutional vision and objectives, specifically as it relates to improving student learning outcomes through increased diversity,

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equity, and inclusion practices for online students. PLCs consist of educators engaging in a collaborative process of "collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators" (DuFour et al., 2016, p. 10). The mission of PLCs is refined and focused. They are not designed and will not tolerate a corporate "vent" culture. Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2004), posits that PLCs are differentiated from other professional development efforts in that PLCs are "ongoing, embedded within context specific needs of a particular setting, aligned with reform initiatives, [and] grounded in a collaborative, inquiry-based approach to learning" (p. 1). We assert that PLCs are a key to bridging the gap between the stalling of past efforts to successful implementation that promotes meaningful change and proliferation of diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies.

Online Higher Education and the Diverse Learner

In the last decade, online education programs have been increasing in popularity. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, distance learning studies indicated that 6,359,121 of all higher education students were taking at least one online class, with 47.2% of those students exclusively online (Seaman et al., 2018). It is expected that the 2020 Covid pandemic has fueled even greater need and interest in online education. While instructors have long been navigating diversity and equity challenges for in-person teaching, new opportunities arise as more instruction moves online.

A benefit of online learning is that students from a variety of locations and regions can attend, thus resulting in diverse online classrooms. However, Kang and Chang (2016) asserted that "overlooking the critical role culture plays in online learning will lead to detrimental

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educational and psychological consequences" (p. 780). In other words, if students do not sense that culture is valued or considered in the classroom, they may begin to experience feelings of isolation, alienation, and even depression. These feelings of not-belonging can contribute to higher student drop-out rates. According to Milheim (2017) "not only does culture have an impact on the overall classroom experience, but it has also shown to affect learning, motivation, and satisfaction in a course" (p. 1). If students increasingly desire online programs, but do not feel that the course materials and instruction are considerate of diverse and individual differences, it may result in a decline in program offerings and a financial loss for the institutions (Harris & Martin, 2012).

To promote greater equity and engagement we must understand the demographics of online students. While this varies, there is general demographic data that can provide insight. According to Learning House (2019), students that opt for online learning tend to be of lower socioeconomic status, with 43% of undergraduates and 25% of graduate students having annual incomes below $39,000. Additionally, 38% of online undergraduate students identify as belonging to a race other than White and 35% of online graduate students identify as non-White races (Learning House, 2019). Online students are also made up of 30% first generation college students. Further, it can sometimes be assumed that White/Caucasian students are not in need of individual consideration. However, this population is also diverse, and a significant number may struggle in the online classroom due to age, gender, socioeconomic background, learning ability, and/or prior educational experience. Thus, students from all ethnicities may experience hardship that can hinder success in the online classroom (Rogers & Wang, 2009).

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Diversity of the Learner

Economic Adversity

According to Bawa (2016), students of low economic status experience (a) greater family obligations; (b) a higher cognitive load due to lacking experience with online learning systems and lesser interaction with the instructor; (c) reduced motivation resulting from course design and minimal real-world context in the course materials; (d) unfamiliarity with formal education technology, despite comfort they may have with their personal technology; (e) greater dissatisfaction with course quality and perceived differences between students and instructors. Additionally, van Breda (2018) asserted that socioeconomic factors and development status contributes to one's level of resiliency. Thus, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may have lower levels of resiliency to overcome these obstacles. If more students with lower socioeconomic status are comprising our online classrooms, it is essential that we recognize their barriers to success. For example, if they have greater family/work obligations, they might be more prone to missing deadlines. Further, if socioeconomic factors contribute to one's level of resiliency, students of lower socioeconomic status may have a higher likelihood of withdrawing from courses or the entire program after missed deadlines. Similarly, challenges with technology or negative perceptions around course content could increase feelings of inadequacy, dissatisfaction, or alienation, which may prompt a student to drop-out. Thus, there is great urgency to prioritize the use of instruction, course materials, and student support that reflects and meets the needs of diverse students.

Cultural Representation

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The online classroom includes extensive and detailed curriculum designed by the faculty and/or instructional designers. As such, the online classroom reflects the institution's and/or faculty's cultural values. Thus, online classrooms include artifacts and general nuances of the culture of the designer, any of which could be at odds with the values of students from different backgrounds (Kinasevyeh, 2010). If the cultural background of the student is disconnected with that of the instructor, receptivity to learning could be impacted since perceived ethnic, racial, linguistic, social, religious, or economic differences can hinder the motivation to learn (Altugan, 2014).

Language Confidence and Communication. One major factor that can become a barrier for culturally diverse students' success in the Western online classroom is their confidence level with the English language. The first concern with language is the student's proficiency in writing and grammar resulting in the possibility of losing points on assignments for grammar and spelling errors. While this challenge may seem obvious, there are other perhaps more covert implications for the online classroom, such as uncertainty around cultural norms regarding classroom communication and how to express disagreement appropriately in English (Biesenbach-Lucas, 2003). As a result, some students, for example, may be hesitant to disagree in online discussions because they do not want to appear argumentative to their peers (Uzuner, 2009). Instead of risking appearing argumentative, they opt for being overly agreeable, vague, or have participation that is under-developed and does not meet substantive discussion requirements. The result is either earning lower grades because they are perceived to not display adequate critical thinking skills, or they may skip the assignment as a result of lacking confidence, again resulting in poor grades and a negative impact on their academic performance.

Both of these scenarios pose challenges for instructors seeking to promote inclusivity because the optimal, fair, equitable remedy is not clear.

High/Low Power Distance. Western countries are often considered to be Low Power Distance culture (Hofstede, 1980). In education this manifests as norms in which instructors and students can speak openly and directly. Students are encouraged to ask questions and even to query their professor. However, students who come from a High Power Distance culture may perceive speaking out and questioning as a sign of disrespect and thus may be uncomfortable communicating directly with their instructor (Hofstede, 1980; Uzuner, 2009). When physical cues are missing in the online environment and a student appears to be "absent" or disengaged because they do not ask questions, their performance may be hindered as a result of not obtaining clarification (Milheim, 2017; Tapanes et al., 2009) and these students may not perform well on assignments related to active inquiry such as discussion forums. This is another reminder of the potential risks associated with educator unawareness and neglect of equity practices that are intended to help our diverse online learning population.

Need to Mitigate Student Barriers

Early higher education institutions originated for the benefit and education of a homogeneous, affluent student population (Thelin, 2004). Although higher education institutions now welcome and serve diverse learners, historically entrenched higher education norms pose barriers to students who do not share those privileges. It is not enough to recruit and welcome diverse students. In other words, a focus on first-order change to address diverse representation of faculty, staff, and students within the campus community, while certainly a priority, is not the entire picture. The infrastructure to facilitate equity, inclusion, and access for diverse learners

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requires examination and change. This second-order examination of the structural barriers that exist within higher education institutions and disrupt diversity and equity efforts is crucial. Without this deeper evaluation of barriers, championed both by faculty and the larger institution, the lived experience of underrepresented students and diverse learners will not fundamentally improve (Byrd, 2022).

The Need for Change

While the research on the challenges for diverse students pursuing higher education is beginning to grow, Patton et al. (2019) brings attention to the limited scholarship focusing on specific diversity initiatives or strategies. Of the research on diversity initiatives, only a small percentage centered on diversity work as *organizational* policy and practice. Consequently, the study "on the organizational aspect of diversity work is scarce within a body of literature that is itself already sparse" (Byrd, 2022, p. 3). Although some organizational diversity practice literature exists there is "a gap between stated goals, plans, and practice as well as the absence of substantive positive change" (Byrd, 2022, p. 3).

Further, according to the 2023 Higher Education Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Survey by Hanover Research, it was found that in the classroom, "68% of students believe that topics relevant to DEI are prominent in their coursework, a decrease of three percentage points from the previous year (71%). Also, only 45% agree their courses include thinking about events from another person's point of view" (p. 20). In short, the evidence points to a need to accelerate a culture shift within institutions of higher learning to not just identify the desire to welcome diverse students, but to promote a culture that truly integrates diversity, equity, and inclusion at

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all levels of the institution. The logical starting point for enhancing the educational experience is in the classroom and that charge must be led by faculty.

Given that higher education administrators, faculty, and staff may all hold varying perspectives about the needs of diversity and equity practices within the campus community, campuses are left "without a cohesive, unified approach to organizational change related to diversity" (Byrd, 2022, p. 4). Often, functional challenges of goal setting or implementation are not the only hurdle to overcome; rather, as authors Ahmed and Swan (2006) suggest, perhaps the largest impediment is just "how undoable diversity work can be" (p. 44). While discouraging, we must not be disheartened. Byrd (2022) suggests that "successful diversity practice requires the guidance and participation of stakeholders who possess agentic understandings of structural barriers to equity and who are prepared to take effective action, including through race-conscious, equity-minded practice across organizational levels" (p. 4). An agentic understanding, perhaps, is a necessary antecedent of action for faculty in higher education. Researcher and psychologist, Dr. Albert Bandura is regarded as a foremost authority on self-efficacy, a mechanism in human agency. Bandura (2008) argues that we have control over our self-development and that we exercise self-efficacy when we invest in environments that encourage growth and accept inevitable failure or missteps. Taken a step further, Bandura offers insights on 'collective self-efficacy', a measure of a group's belief in the achievement of a common goal. After all, "people's shared belief in their collective efficacy to achieve desired results is a key ingredient of collective agency" (Bandura, 2008, p. 3). If higher education institutions are to enact changes in equity and inclusion practices, committed and agentic faculty ought to be at the front line.

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PLCs as the Strategy for Culture Shift

Teaching in the higher education online environment, while professionally satisfying, may provide limited opportunities to engage in supportive workplace communities, depending on the faculty's residence (whether remote or near the physical campus), the university's infrastructure and utilization of technology to provide avenues for faculty communication and support, and faculty expectations for community engagement (Golden, 2014; Brooks, 2010; Lackey, 2011). Similar to the online student, online faculty can face challenges related to isolation. McCarthy and Samors (2009) suggest that "the most important part of online learning is the structure that supports an online learning community" so that online educators may "bond" with one another and also "bond with the university" (p. 45). In fact, the bond with the university is further strengthened when the online faculty member senses that the institution is conscientious of the faculty's social and professional needs (Dolan, 2011). For faculty teaching exclusively online, therefore, it seems of high importance that they have opportunities to connect within a community where they feel encouraged to innovate and where they receive institutional and collegial support (Eib & Miller, 2006).

The Distinctive Role of Online Faculty

Faculty engagement in PLCs is valuable for educators in the online modality, particularly faculty who teach exclusively online. First, for faculty teaching online, they have a front seat to the everyday experiences of their online student cohorts. As such, faculty are uniquely suited to advocate for the needs of online learners. Barriers to academic success for online learners have been well-documented in the literature (Thelin, 2004; Byrd, 2022), as was outlined in an earlier section of this paper. Faculty not only have access to the empirical data with which to inform

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their teaching and student retention efforts, but they also have the lived experience to support it. Faculty teaching online work alongside their students at a highly accelerated pace, honoring requests for extensions due to emergent circumstances, assisting with technology challenges (especially for non-digital natives), petitioning for incompletes or late withdrawals due to situations outside of the student's control, and answering emails or scheduling phone/video chat meetings at 'non-traditional' times when online students are most active in their studies. Witnessing online learners suffer from and yet also overcome obstacles provides a vantage point that opens even the most unaware eyes to the disadvantages that can plague many online students. Thus, some universities have begun to focus less on whether students are "college-ready", and instead emphasize the university's duty to be "student-ready"; in other words, "how to prepare academic instruction and supports so that all students who matriculate can develop their capacities, regardless of their initial circumstances" (McNair et al., 2016, p. 12). Perhaps this shift in focus and terminology will serve as a catalyst for educators to consider establishing PLCs with the diverse learner in mind. Within a supportive PLC community where educators exchange ideas, critically reflect, and take action, the steady, "stepwise process of transformation in teaching philosophy and practice" may occur (Spitzer, Wedding, & DiMauro, 1994, p. 1).

Faculty in Action

Equipped with professional expertise specific to diverse online learners, online faculty can significantly contribute to learning-centered initiatives which do not simply ensure that online students are taught, but that ensure that students learn (DuFour, 2004). DuFour challenges educational stakeholders to consider three crucial questions within PLCs:

1) What do we want each student to learn?

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2) How will we know when each student has learned it?

3) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

As faculty engage in ongoing inquiry, action, and assessment of these questions within a PLC, we get closer to building the collaborative culture and coordinated strategies for improving learning for all students (DuFour, 2004). The opportunity to problem-solve with other faculty and converse about wins and challenges provides a much-needed space for teaching development (Golden, 2016). DuFour further posits, "when a school begins to function as a professional learning community, teachers become aware of the incongruity between their commitment to ensure learning for all students and their lack of coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn" (p. 8). Insight about these existing discrepancies is gained when community members have public conversations about formerly 'private' decisions related to course objectives, curricular materials, pacing, and assessments (DuFour, 2004). In other words, how can we launch a coordinated strategy for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion practices for diverse online learners if educators are siloed and do not transparently discuss strengths, weaknesses, and innovative ideas?

With focused, institutionally-supported collaboration, faculty may systematically reveal new (to them) ideas for implementation. For example, at the course level, 'learner-centered' enhancements to course syllabi are associated with student perceptions of their instructor as being more engaged, creative, and having higher professor-student rapport (Richmond et al, 2019). Additionally, Bain's (2004) research on what the best college teachers do demonstrates that the best teachers construct syllabi that communicate "trust, rejection of power, and setting standards that represent authentic goals rather than schoolwork" (p. 74). Fuentes, Zelaya, and

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Madsen (2021) have even developed a guide to assist novice or advanced faculty to evaluate the impact of their own socio-cultural backgrounds on the syllabi they create. For optimal implementation, they suggest following Lang's (2016) guidance that "simple changes" can "make a big difference" (p. 1). Rather than engaging in "herculean efforts," Fuentes, Zelaya, and Madsen (p. 72) suggest that faculty start by implementing a few new ideas within their syllabi course plan, with long-term aims of continued learning and increased 'cultural consciousness', defined as "the process of developing awareness of culture in the self, which can result in expanding understandings of culture and developing deeper cultural knowledge about other individuals and contexts" (Paez & Albert, 2012, p. 2). With this practical example in mind, it evidences many opportunities for faculty to learn about curricular and course management improvements that could benefit diverse online learners. Certainly, the power of PLCs lies not only with an individual faculty stakeholder expending sweat equity; in addition, it requires institutional support and the commitment and sustaining effort of all educators within the institution to hold themselves accountable and to persist in the face of adversity, just as we expect from our students (DuFour, 2004).

Institutional Benefits

Organizational and individual (faculty) investment in professional learning communities focused on the diverse learner requires a significant cultural shift. According to Addis et al. (2013), asking faculty to enhance their teaching or that they adopt new high impact strategies is not possible without it. Teaching remains largely an individualistic and isolated endeavor (Sirum, Madigan, & Kilonsky, 2009) and traditionally universities have rewarded and incentivized the pursuit of scholarly research, which according to Baker et al. (2014), can detract from focus on

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quality teaching. Thus, higher education institutions must be intentional in their support and advocacy of professional learning communities. While the cultural change to adopt new and diverse teaching strategies may seem daunting, faculty participation and collaboration through a professional learning community "offer[s] a way to incrementally revise expectations and requirements of instruction" (Einbinder, 2018, p. 42). Additionally, PLCs have been observed to impact teaching practices as measured by student evaluations (Ebersole, 2008). Although it requires purposeful effort, it is a worthwhile undertaking. Jackson et al. (2013) found that faculty who participated in professional learning communities reported improved job satisfaction as well as enhanced collaboration abilities (Hegler, 2004). Further, Linder, Post, and Calabrese (2012) discovered that, at the conclusion of one school year, when PLC teachers were composing a public presentation to share the results of their year-long efforts, teachers "displayed an ownership of their newly acquired knowledge and a sense of empowerment attained" (p. 20). In short, evidence suggests that professional learning communities can influence innovative and attitudinal change in faculty; and even further, it can be an important venue for overall professional development which undoubtedly benefits the institution (Beach & Cox, 2009; Sirum & Madigan, 2010).

Recommendations for Effective Implementation of PLCs

Institutional Support of PLCs

Mullen and Schunk (2010) assert that PLCs are an organizational reform initiative which can drive change by promoting "campus-wide improvement, with student learning and achievement as primary goals" (p. 194). This makes PLCs a critical, strategic approach in the pursuit of enhancing teaching and learning for diverse learners. The foremost recommendations

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for institutional leaders who want to support the launch and implementation of PLCs includes: 1) consistent alignment of the PLC with the institution's mission and core values; 2) facilitating voluntary, cross-discipline, and cross-cultural collaboration; and 3) enhancing motivation and incentives.

Alignment of the PLC with Institution Mission and Values

As with any organizational change initiative, clear alignment with institutional mission and values is essential. Boose and Hutchings (2016) assert that clear alignment of PLCs with the institution's mission facilitates their effective implementation, and Gray (2000) adds that it is key for PLC sustainability. Since higher education institutions are charged with educating students and serving their academic needs, and the purpose of PLCs is to enhance learning and meet the unique needs of diverse learners, it may seem that there is automatic alignment. However, meeting the needs of diverse leaders involves changes to entrenched norms, whether it be modifications to curriculum, in teaching strategies, or both. Thus, consistent communication of the alignment to the core mission reinforces the importance and value of the charge to the institution. Emphasizing institutional commitment signals to PLC members that their efforts are valued and worthwhile.

Facilitating Voluntary, Cross-Discipline, and Cross-Cultural Collaboration

It is often minority faculty who undertake in isolation the challenge of addressing the needs of diverse students. The benefit and purpose of a professional learning community is that diverse faculty with a wide breadth of experience and from cross-disciplines can come together to share ideas and practices (Roth, 2014). It is this interdisciplinary collaboration that leads to identifying, developing, and eventually implementing new teaching practices (Stacey & Mackey,

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2009). Further, voluntary participation is also an important component as willing participants coming together promotes an environment where trust and respect can flourish through the development of shared values regardless of the faculty's own culture and area of expertise.

Colleges and universities are typically divided into departments based on subject-matter areas, often resulting in silos. Additionally, bureaucratic and hierarchical administrative units, as well as other rigid structures such as the promotion and tenure process, can act as barriers to cross-divisional projects and partnerships (Kanter 1994; Senge 1990). These barriers may stifle collaborative efforts and their ability to be effectively sustained, thus institution leaders must implement and promote the administrative structures and mechanisms to facilitate cross-disciplinary collaboration (Furco & Moely, 2012). By mitigating barriers to collaboration and facilitating opportunities for the learning community to come together, institutional commitment is clearly conveyed.

Enhancing Motivation and Incentives

Participating in a professional learning community can be altruistically motivating for faculty. The intangible rewards include satisfaction in self-guided professional development, a drive to provide enhanced and improved teaching strategies, comradery, mentoring, and the satisfaction of collaborating with like-minded colleagues. However, altruistic motivation to grow and improve instruction delivery to better serve diverse learners can waver and ultimately be fatiguing. Institution leaders can incentivize and reward participating faculty through a variety of strategies, such as providing financial compensation in the form of stipends or load-release. Whatever incentives are available, they should be made clear to participating members of the

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PLC. According to Furco and Moely (2012), the key is that participation incentives should reduce, instead of add to, existing workloads.

Growth-Mindset

An evaluation of intelligence and skill as being malleable and non-fixed, and seeing missteps or failures as opportunities for future success is the gift of a growth-mindset (Dweck, 2016). It is obvious that teaching faculty ought to inspire and motivate their students to cultivate a growth-mindset as they relentlessly pursue their educational and professional goals. Dweck (2017) suggests that "the view you adopt for yourself profoundly affects the way you lead your life. It can determine whether you become the person you want to be and whether you accomplish the things you value" (p. 11). Countless studies have demonstrated that students with a growth-mindset will challenge themselves academically, believe in their ability to increase their skills and abilities, and will achieve better grades (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Mueller & Dweck, 1998; Romero et al., 2014; Stipek & Gralinkski, 1996). While teachers excel at inspiring their students toward this end, it may not always come naturally to apply the same concept to themselves. However, it is critical for teachers to lean into a growth-mindset for themselves as they seek to employ innovative strategies within the online learning environment.

Yaeger et al. (2016) acknowledges this fundamental tension of whether a student-focused growth-mindset can flourish when not supported by the educational context. This is referred to as the "mindset-plus-supportive-context hypothesis" (Yaeger et al., 2016, p. 19). A mindset-plus-supportive-context in action expects that teachers will not only convey the important tenets of a growth-mindset to their students, but that teachers will also implement pedagogical practices and assessments that emphasize the same values within their classroom environment (Canning et al.,

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2019). A study of STEM students conducted by Canning et al. (2019) demonstrated that faculty with a fixed mindset (e.g., intelligence is fixed; innate qualities cannot be developed much) have poorer outcomes, including lower student course performance (especially underrepresented racial/ethnic minorities) and a lower likelihood of students recommending the course to others. Results also indicated that the known racial achievement gap was twice as large for courses taught by faculty with a fixed-mindset when compared to faculty with a growth-mindset. Less belonging, less trust, more anxiety, and less interest are also additional barriers that emerge when students encounter institutions that view them with a fixed-mindset (Emerson & Murphy, 2015; Bian et al., 2018). In the context of this current work, it is, therefore, essential for faculty to actively engage their growth-mindset with diverse online learners and, even better, put that growth-mindset to the test through engagement in learning communities with a willingness to learn from others. As one PLC member stated, "Sometimes I get stuck in my ideas and the way I do something, so it is nice to hear other ideas" (Linder, Post, & Calabrese, 2012, p. 19). Faculty must contemplate the demand to disrupt previous instructional routines, assessment practices, curricular materials, and engagement style with students so that the seeds planted may flourish in a student-ready online learning environment (Yaeger et al., 2022; Guzzardo et al., 2021; Little, 2003).

Conclusion

The call to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education is imperative, especially to mitigate the common challenges that online students face. The implementation of professional learning communities is an under-utilized strategy for addressing the gap between institutional initiatives to welcome an increasing number of diverse students, and the culture shift

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needed to truly provide learning opportunities that reach diverse students. Implementing PLCs for cross-discipline faculty to convene and actively work to identify, enhance, and implement classroom curriculum and teaching/engagement strategies that leverage diversity and promote inclusion is the key to achieving the needed cultural shift. Although it may, at times, appear to be an insurmountable mission, incremental improvements have an exponential impact in fostering an inclusive learning environment, reinforcing students' sense of belonging, and improving retention, persistence, and graduation outcomes. With consistent faculty and institutional commitment, professional learning communities can be the fuel that transforms this vision into a reality.

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