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Why Diversity, Inclusion and Equity Initiatives in Higher Education Really "DIE"

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Abstract

Managerialism in higher education is often a reaction that presidents and boards employ when trying to show they are tackling obvious problems. Hiring "Chief Diversity Offices" reflects this trend and reveals the difficulty of administrators and faculty in seeing past the hierarchy of colonialism and addressing the mandate for authentic inclusion by returning to a pre-colonial mindset via critical, counter-hegemonic education and worldview reflection.

I find it symbolic that rearranging the letters in the usual acronym for my title's topic produces the word "DIE." It reminds the fact that the best-intentioned DEI programs historically fail to achieve their proclaimed goals. (Newkirk, 2019; Four Arrows, 2019). The title of Newkirk's cited article for the Chronicle of Higher Education tells part of the story: "Why Diversity Initiatives Fail: Symbolic Gestures and Millions of Dollars Can't Overcome Apathy." While true enough, I assert a more profound problem exists, one that explains the apathy and more. It stems from our settler coloniality, our ignorance of it, and our resistance to overcoming it. I refer to the foundational hegemonic and colonialized structures endemic to our social, political, and economic systems replicated for the most part in higher education. Despite the rhetoric and the marginal toleration of counter-hegemonic democracy, critical pedagogy, or decolonization, universities maintain the status quo for the most part. Moreover, even tolerance is diminishing with the rise of right-wing political efforts (Ellis, 2021).

Nothing new here, of course. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney characterize it poetically: It cannot be accepted that the university is a place of enlightenment. One can only sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of—this is the path of the subversive intellectual in the modern university" (Moten & Harney, 2004, 101). Perhaps I trod this path yesterday in a conference presentation at my own university that the lead presenter titled "Scholar-Practitioner or Scholar-Activist?" It seemed to be a well-intended, even interesting approach to emphasizing our university's social/ecological justice vision and mission for the students. However, I felt that axiology was more important than semantics in addressing the question as to which term best described expectations for a scholar-practitioner. So, I proceeded to identify a number of highly influential scholar-practitioners and "activists" who effectively promoted scientific racism; used Western Christianity to establish anti-Black and anti-Indigenous rationales; or employed Western philosophy to support, willfully or otherwise, the anthropocentrism that contributes to our ecological crises.

In other words, I brought decolonization into the conversation, emphasizing the part of it that aspires to re-embrace the foundational understanding of the human-nature-supernatural world that preceded colonization I refer to as our "Indigenous worldview." This led to at least one faculty and several students expressing concerns about my creating a rigid binary. I offered to anyone interested my article, soon to be published in Integral Leadership Review, entitled "Why Making Vital Distinctions Between Indigenous and Dominant Worldviews is Not a "Binary Thinking Problem." So far, no one has taken me up on the offer. I have long thought that rebuttals to decolonizing/Indigenizing education stem, ironically, from the Western binary worldview. I say ironically because it is well understood that the Indigenous worldview is a non-binary oriented way of understanding the world, as Hillary S. Webb explains in her book on complementary dualism among Indigenous people in Peru (Webb, 2012). The goal of criticality in identifying and re-balancing or appropriately complementing the dominant worldview's foundational precepts with one's proven more effective is an example of this.

The rapid rise in DEI initiatives seem to show there is a movement that is at least in alignment with the goals of decolonization, but it is an illusion. The most sincere and wise university presidents, those who, amidst the challenges and complexities of their position, truly want to achieve the original goals for DEI, know their efforts will be little more than symbolic. They know that besides the federal government, there will be faculty, staff and students shout out against overt dismantling of higher education via curricula, policies, procedures, hiring,

recruitment, and instructional philosophies. They can respond to anti-racism because, well, the media is shouting about it, thanks to the courage of bystanders video-taping atrocities with their cell phones. However, they still are not speaking out in support of Indigenous Peoples and their allies protesting oil pipelines. They are not addressing the most vital attacks on diversity revealed by the world's unprecedented extinction rates. They seem to miss the message of the United Nations biodiversity report, the largest ecological study ever, about the potential role of Indigenous worldview (Four Arrows, 2019).

I am not saying that many in the DEI movement are not sincere, only that they are using the tools of the master that will not and have been proven not to work. Hiring Chief Diversity Officers is part of the hierarchy that causes many of the problems relating to disrespect for diversity. The over-focus on the socially constructed but very real problem of race is also problematic. The DEI emphasis on "anti-racism" to respect diversity and inclusion tends to ignore the related problems facing all of humanity. Once again, this occurs because we are not addressing the foundation of our beliefs and actions that reside in the operating worldview of colonialized minds.

In his paper, "Decolonization Not Inclusion: Indigenous Resistance to American Settler Colonialism," Erich W. Steinman writes: "The settler-colonial framework provides the foundation for bringing into clear view the *ongoing* modes of domination that contemporary indigenous peoples are resisting, for understanding a variety of nationhood based actions as potentially *decolonizing* in nature, and for understanding similarities and differences between these dynamics and the experiences of other groups" (2016, p. 220). He says that resisting and overcoming settler colonialism must go beyond mere substitution but rather seek complementarity and more balanced perspectives between Indigenous and current systemic structures.

Another problem with most DEI programs in higher education is a focus on internal issues and a minimal focus on curriculum. Curricula should be the main place where DEI conversations take place. How do we start such a collaborative process in our classrooms, virtual or otherwise, to reinvent higher education? When do we start discussing the consequences of anthropocentric, hierarchical, materialistic mindsets that currently rule? What role do university presidents and provosts have in addressing this curricular focus? begin.

In 2013, Scott Sherman asked in one of his pieces in *The Nation*, "Where are the voices of university presidents on the major issues of the day?" He goes on to say, "the time has come to demand more from them and to hold them to more elevated standards." University presents who are now loudly speaking out against anti-racism still believe it inappropriate to speak out against oil pipelines. What other issues are political or might turn conservative students away? University executives and boards should not have to wait for media to encourage taking a stand on something, as has recently occurred with recent skin-color racism tragedies. Higher education should be leading such discussions and not depend on media to make them relatively safe.

The championing of Chief Diversity Officers, though proven unsuccessful, still potentially could work. The first thing would be to change the title to minimize a sense of hierarchy or managerialism. The second thing to do would be to assure there is financial and other resources available to support a diversity and inclusion guide. Lack of support for CDOs has resulted in national turn-over rates less than three years (Cutter & Weber, July 13, 2020).

Moreoever, a wider and more holistic orientation is needed, again, emphasizing an across the curricula perspective. A recent memo from a university president hiring a second CDO, with the first one having lasted only two years, reflects how this is not usually done. The memo, describing the duties of the CDO, states that the position will support three goals: (1) advancing a more welcoming culture; (2) guiding faculty, students and staff toward deep self-examination; and (3) inspiring university efforts to engage anti-racism work.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with these three goals. The problem is that they should not be the responsibility of one executive. They are the intrinsic responsibility of everyone in the university setting. Existing leadership and shared governance, curricula, hiring and recruitment, all have such goals in their job descriptions. In my own university, I have resisted the hiring of a CDO, asking our leaders to study why the position is not proven successful and brainstorming other ways to spend the annual salary of a CDO. I have suggested that the motivation should not be a reaction to the violent racism that is occurring, but should be considered a necessary preventive that is intrinsic to the goal of higher education. Note the spike in hiring CDOs that happened during the tragic murders of a number of Black citizens and the subsequent global protests (Jaeger, April 6, 2021). Must we have more extreme consequences that gain media attention before scholars can take action to address problems that have been facing us for centuries?

In a report entitled "The Emergence of the Chief Diversity Officer in Higher Education," Russell Reynolds Associates (RRA) state that as of 2016 "2/3 of major U.S. universities had appointed a chief diversity officer or an executive-level equivalent (2019, p.3). Although I could not find a more recent statistic for higher education, I imagine this number has significantly increased. According to a LinkedIn study relating to CDO positions in general, "the number of CDOs grew by 107% from 2015 to 2020 (Anderson, Sept. 2, 2020). Russel Reynolds Associates, undoubtedly a respected company, may actually play a role in the motivation to hire CDOs rather than take responsibility otherwise. According to their website, they "specialize in recruiting senior leaders to colleges and universities and offers advisory services to strengthen institutions' culture and leadership and to help solve complex leadership challenges." The company puts out many articles about CDOs, most of them promotional.

I am not insinuating that the CDO movement in higher education is a corporate-induced fad. Rather, the rise of the DEI industry and hiring of CDOs is well-described by one of Russell Reynolds Associates' articles on the Internet. The first sentence says it clearly: "Appointing a new diversity leader has long been one of the most visible and immediate options for companies to show their support for social justice (Paikeday, Chan & Stuart, June 21, 2021). This brings us back my assertion that DEI initiatives in higher education will not work without decolonization work. Giving the responsibility to a high-ranking executive and avoiding the hard work of decolonization will maintain the status quo. Non-structural solutions will continue to perpetuate a false sense of the origins of inequality.

Solutions will not happen, however, until we honestly study the phenomenon of settler colonialism. If, in the rare chance an Indigenous scholar who is well-versed in decolonization/Indigenization work is placed in a DEI leadership position, perhaps with sufficient support, this might happen. However, it remains the responsibility of every faculty member and administrator ultimately. With decolonization work throughout the curriculum, we can come to understand why most university education reinforces settler coloniality and

the racism based on it. What practices are based on hierarchical, materialistic and anthropocentric worldview precepts? How do we move beyond talking about white supremacy and racism in ways that prevent them? St. Denis (2009) writes that instead of merely "acknowledging the need for critical examination of how and why race matters in our society, it is often suggested that it is Aboriginal people[s] and their culture[s] that must be explained to and understood by those in position of racial dominance" (p. 163). This author emphasizes how important it is to understand how Indigenous peoples still holding on to their tradition, nature-based worldview, are inherently different from the settler population, which now includes BIPOC as well as Whites. The differences require exploration and alternative narratives, including comparative and complementary worldview reflection.

Such decolonizing work also challenges the history of excluding Indigenous Peoples from anti-racism conversations. It moves education beyond conversation and into action as the Indigenous protests reveal. According to Lorenz (2013), in her article "Turning Culturally Inclusive Education and Anti-racist Education into a Decolonial Pedagogy:"

> the trick to executing a decolonizing approach in such a manner relies heavily on settler teachers willing to unsettle themselves for the mutual benefit of Indigenous and non-Indigenous children. As more settler teachers commit to decolonizing themselves, and more Indigenous teachers graduate from university, the more likely that a decolonizing approach can be put into action.

I realize that universities (and their presidents) do not want to face off against resistant professors nor conservative "paying customers." However, if we are to take advantage of the current opportunity for true anti-racist education, educators and administrators must have the courage to challenge the status quo as relates to the absence of anti-nature and anti-Indigenous education. This is best done respectfully and collaboratively. If the opposite of inclusion is decolonization, then seeking complementarity with empathy is a requirement. In her piece, "Decolonizing Education: My Journey on the Road Less Traveled," Candiss Brooks writes about her "experiences as a black woman" who "did not develop a racial consciousness until her late 20s:"

My late blooming of understanding led me to an exhaustive search for answers. In my quest I found a solution to this oppressive patter- the decolonization of education, a dismantling of the current power structure. If teachers are taught his at the undergraduate level, I believe we will have a more equitable education systems… Americans can no longer delude themselves into believing that colonization no longer has an effect on the world…A solution to the inequitable education dilemma is decolonization…All teachers should be knowledgeable about how to retrieve other narratives for their students. They should learn how to identify the role or Eurocentrism in education. This is how we deconstruct our current system (Brooks, 2020).

I close with a list of some practical ways to decolonize DEI work that all faculty, staff, students and administrators can do.[1]

1. Collaboration between all participants about how the status quo frames the world.

[1] This list includes suggestions from: Keele Manifesto for Decolonizing the Curriculum. (2018). *Journal of Global Faultlines*, 5(1–2), 97–99. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/jglobfaul.5.1-2.0097

2. Recognize, respect and courageously question and/or challenge university hierarchy and power structures.
3. Encourage one another to rethink accepted assumptions in curriculum and instruction as well as in university policy that ultimately comes from and maintains colonized perspectives and actions.
4. Seek out multiple voices and inspire alternative perspectives and mutual learning opportunities.
5. Remember that instruction occurs is as important as what is presented and critical engagement is as important as anti-colonial texts.
6. Identify ways in which the university structurally reproduces colonial hierarchies and respectfully confront them with alternative possibilities.
7. Neither color nor race is "ranked" in this collaborative dialogue
8. Enable students, staff and faculty to speak power to truth with respect and scholarship and with their own unique perspective and without fear of reprisal.
9. Help administrators accept challenges and questions without taking it personally.
10. Consider the historical context of the university and what worked and what is best change.
11. Recognize that Indigenizing our teaching is not just about culturally relevant teaching; Indigenizing our teaching aims to challenge the dominant narratives about our collective histories, contemporary aspirations and challenges. Indigenizing our teaching is also about supporting Indigenous peoples and communities' goals for the self-determination and sovereignty.
12. Discuss how multi-culturalism can be a form of settler colonization.
13. Focus on place-based learning and social/ECOLOGICAL realities, realizing that respect for diversity can begin with respect for biodiversity in nature, not just for preventing human extinction but for ending the colonial belief in human-centricity.
14. Consider arts based and non-dominant forms of demonstrating understanding including re-storying, photo essay, performance, reflective writing etc.
15. Name the dominant worldview; make visible non-dominant worldviews and work.
16. Consider the role that ceremony may play in your course design, and department/Faculty norms.
17. Consider offering courses/programs in off-campus locations (i.e.: introductory courses being taught at the food bank, friendship centre, public library etc.). Recognize that Indigenizing our teaching is not just about culturally relevant teaching. Indigenizing our teaching aims to challenge the dominant narratives about our collective histories, contemporary aspirations and challenges. Indigenizing our teaching is also about supporting Indigenous peoples and communities' goals for the self-determination and sovereignty.

18. Identifying ways in which the university structurally reproduces colonial hierarchies; confronting, challenging and rejecting the status quo; and reimagining them and putting alternatives into practice for the benefit of our academic integrity and our social viability.
19. Build community through joint student, faculty alumni research and practice projects that address inequalities including race, ethnicity, gender, social class and historical and cultural trauma in the global context.
20. Engage together in deep self-reflection about each of our own identities and how they have been preset by the typifications and relevances that we were each born into and the traumas and challenges that each of us are facing. (Mindful Inquiry and Transformative Phenomenology are such processes.)
21. Include somatic engagement with each other to build loving community using breath work, yogas, trance, music, drum circles, dance and other practices. Bring our bodies and minds into congruency with our emotions and texts.
22. Engage in and teach "Doing no Harm" and "Compassion" in all we do.

A professor does not have to master this material in advance nor serve it on a plate to students. Such expertise or didactic approaches to teaching usually reflect colonized thinking. Indigenous learning is largely experiential. Of course, a great advantage exists in having an Indigenous teacher, especially one who was raised according to traditional values and is fluent in the traditional language. Even such individuals are likely to carry some colonized beliefs via their Western education. In any case, a traditionalist with a stronghold on original wisdom would mostly "teach" via guiding student research, observation, and praxis. Like any field of study, new knowledge and interdisciplinary investigation can unveil important precepts of the Indigenous worldview, and of unique, place-based Indigenous knowledge. Ample literature exists to assist the process of decolonizing education, but ultimately it is deep reflection, dialogue, and real-life applications that make the seeds of knowledge grow.

Decolonization and Indigenization are not just things to add to other "social/ecological justice" targets. They are intrinsic in the same way that any reference to social justice remains inseparable from ecological justice and sustainability. Ultimately, colonized thinking continues loss of human rights, rampant inequality, blatant racism or unconscious bias, hate crimes, and winner-take-all based violence. They are institutionalized in legal systems and education. Working within colonized systems that assume and support imperial, patriarchal nation-state, free-market capitalism, neo-liberalism, and hierarchical rule to obtain social/ecological justice is an impossible task. Although higher education generally reflects these same assumptions, it has the potential to originate a positive transformation.

Recognizing interconnectedness and compassionately working toward transformative social change takes courage. However, courage can be contagious and once action is taken can turn to fearless trust in whatever outcome results. Hope is the certainty that however it winds up was worth the journey. This is, by the way, a lesson to be learned from Sitting Bull (Four Arrows, 2020).

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