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Refocusing on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion During the Pandemic and Beyond: Lessons from a Community of Practice

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By Taffye Benson Clayton

For several years now, researchers and policymakers have been forecasting the shift in racial and ethnic demographics (<https://www.equityinhighered.org/indicators/u-s-population-trends-and-educational-attainment/race-and-ethnicity-of-the-u-s-population/>) that is currently underway throughout the United States. These demographic changes have largely informed our understanding of diversity and inclusion as our universities prepared for the influx of a more diverse student body.

Diversity brings with it a number of educational benefits (https://web.stanford.edu/~hakuta/www/policy/racial_dynamics/Chapter5.pdf), including improved racial and cultural awareness, enhanced critical thinking, higher levels of service to community, and a more educated citizenry, to name a few. However, other components—namely, equity and inclusion—are essential to delivering on diversity's promise to higher education more broadly.

Inclusion, often referenced in relationship to diversity, is vital for all members of a campus community, but is particularly important to historically underrepresented and marginalized populations. AAC&U describes inclusion (https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/mei/williams_et_al.pdf) as the intentional, ongoing, active institutional efforts to reap the educational benefits of diversity. On a campus,

inclusion means having a valued voice, seeing others like you represented around you and in the curriculum, and knowing that you belong and matter based on how you experience the environment and your interactions with others.

Equity (<https://cue.usc.edu/about/equity/>), as defined by the Center for Urban Education, encompasses “achieving parity in student educational outcomes, regardless of race or ethnicity, particularly, given the marginalization of some racial and ethnic groups in American education.” Institutionalizing equity on our campuses can be achieved as senior leaders understand and adopt “equity-mindedness (<https://cue.usc.edu/about/equity/equity-mindedness/>),” which is “a mode of thinking that calls attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes, resulting in individual (university leaders, faculty, and professionals) and institutional responsibility for advancing equity-achieving practices to impact success for all students.”

How crisis can bring about change

The social unrest that followed the tragedy of George Floyd’s murder last May underscored the inequities that persist in American society. While these inequities are complex and cut across several domains, educational inequities are significant (<http://www.equityinhighered.org>) and demand a response from campus leaders. Resolving these inequities provides higher education with a unique opportunity to have a substantial and enduring impact on the lives of communities of color.

Addressing educational inequities has been the focus of institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) operations for years. However, the recent triple crisis—the COVID-19 pandemic, the systemic racism in this country, and racial inequities in higher education—has prompted a clarion call for more effective strategies that will result in more equitable outcomes for underrepresented populations by placing DEI at the core of our institutional practice. By promoting the importance of a diverse campus, adopting an equity-minded approach to leadership, and facilitating greater inclusion, institutional leaders can ensure that our institutions deliver on the nation’s promise of higher education for all students.

When our institutions were forced to reconsider our approach to DEI in light of COVID-19, I partnered with ACE to lead the first diversity, equity, and inclusion and COVID-19 Community of Practice (the “community”) with senior higher education leaders across the country. Given the shift of most campuses from in-person to online classes, our initial meeting involved sharing insights about how we pivoted to virtual learning during spring 2020 and planned for a safe and effective 2020–21 academic year experience.

We understood how critical it was for colleges and universities to continue fulfilling their respective missions. The spring 2020 transition to remote learning and work models exposed inequities among our students, faculty, and employees and illuminated the importance of addressing the different needs across these populations. Tackling these inequities required real-time strategies and solutions that would endure over time.

During the period between our first and second meeting, as issues of inequity and COVID-19 dominated our discussions, we witnessed the murder of George Floyd, an African American man, by a police officer in Minneapolis. Nearly instantly, matters that were the core emphasis of our community became of intense global interest.

Our work as colleagues in the community, and as leaders on our respective campuses, continued in the face of this dominating triple crisis. This unique positioning made us view our work with renewed purpose, greater creativity, and a sense of urgency. The experience also underscored what we have always known—that diversity, equity, and inclusion are core to the realization of the institutional mission on each one of our campuses.

Influenced by this ethos, we sought to equip senior leaders with practical, relevant, and accessible DEI tools and resources. These resources offer guidance for centering diversity, equity, and inclusion in institutional emergency response planning, institutional infrastructure and capacity building, and institutional policy and practice development and review.

Lessons learned from the Community of Practice

The work we carried out over the course of several months resulted in the development of four key steps to keeping DEI front and center on your campus.

1. **Approach DEI work as mission critical.** Diversity, equity, and inclusion are at the core of the mission of most higher education institutions, particularly for public colleges and universities, where there is an institutionalized commitment to uplifting the well-being of the state and surrounding communities. When DEI is mission critical, it is a part of everyday institutional problem-solving and decision-making—both during times of crisis and day-to-day operations.
2. **Prioritize and institutionalize DEI as a core competency.** DEI, as a foundational principle, must advance beyond an institution's current slate of leaders. To achieve this goal, DEI must remain a core value for the institution, stand as a clearly articulated competency in job descriptions, and be a part of institutional leader retreats and learning experiences.
3. **Understand that an institutional crisis may further expose unaddressed inequities and be prepared to address them effectively.** Whether COVID-19, racial/campus unrest or

economic challenges, all students, faculty, and staff have been affected by some aspect of the triple crisis. Addressing DEI issues and applying equity-minded approaches, as a matter of routine, prepares the university to be more effective in responding to student, employee, and faculty needs in crisis-related circumstances.

4. **Make DEI everybody's responsibility.** While a centrally located operation is essential for institutions that are serious about infusing DEI across the campus community, DEI must serve as an essential function for all offices, schools, colleges, and units. Institutions with a serious eye toward DEI will ensure that senior executive leaders, college and school deans, faculty, and employees broadly understand equity-mindedness and equity-embedded student success. Without question, each unit within the institution must understand its role in shaping an inclusive campus community.

Higher education can achieve its mission and deliver on the promise of access for all if leaders institutionalize DEI practice and embrace equity-minded approaches in their leadership. Only then will colleges and universities be better positioned to effectively withstand and overcome the inevitable threats of crisis and help their most vulnerable students weather the storm. Now is the time, as the pandemic continues exacerbating the effects of structural barriers that communities of color face in our country, to commit to DEI work and make a true difference in the lives of our students and campus communities—we only have to take action.

The COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed every sector of our global community. One of the many consequences of COVID-19 is an unveiling of the degree to which there are pervasive, structural racial inequities in all sectors of the United States, including in higher education, where students and communities of color continue to face issues with equal access to postsecondary education. If higher education is to make good on its promise of intergenerational mobility and opportunity, we must address these racial equity gaps.

In May 2020, ACE pioneered a community of practice around diversity, equity, and inclusion in the era of COVID-19. This community of practice, led by ACE and Taffye Benson Clayton, associate provost and vice president for inclusion and diversity at Auburn University, brings together leaders from the higher education community across the country to work together to explore and document how institutions can ensure issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are front and center as our country moves forward. This blog is part of a series created by members of the community of practice. The content, themes, and resources that are included in this piece stem from work the community carried out over the course of several months following the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

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Response to “Refocusing on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion During the Pandemic and Beyond: Lessons from a Community of Practice”

Olivia K Owen

Excellent article. I commend Dr. Clayton and her critical contributions to Auburn University and the entire education community.

February 2nd, 2021 (<https://www.higheredtoday.org/2021/01/13/refocusing-diversity-equity-inclusion-pandemic-beyond-lessons-community-practice/#comment-51726>)

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(<http://www.auburn.edu/academic/provost/bios/taffye-clayton.php>)

Taffye Benson Clayton is associate provost and vice president for inclusion and diversity at Auburn University in Alabama. She also led the ACE community of practice around diversity, equity, and inclusion.



MORE INFORMATION

For more material from ACE's community of practice on diversity, equity and inclusion, sign up for a free account on ACE Engage: (<https://engage.acenet.edu/>)

Strengthening Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Higher Education
(<https://engage.acenet.edu/portal/site/library?contentid=2144>)

Resources: Combating COVID-19 in Higher Education With a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Lens
(<https://engage.acenet.edu/portal/site/library?contentid=2146>)

Five Questions to Ask About DEI and Campus Operations During the COVID-19
(<https://engage.acenet.edu/portal/site/library?contentid=2145>)

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