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2-2018

# Equity and Inclusion: Expanding the Urban Ecosystem

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## Citation Details

McNair, T. and Ramaley, J. (2018). Equity and Inclusion: Expanding the Urban Ecosystem . Metropolitan Universities. Vol 29 No 1.

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## **Equity and Inclusion: Expanding the Urban Ecosystem**

Judith A. Ramaley and Tia Brown McNair

As our nation grows ever more diverse, the need to ensure that our educational institutions are truly equitable and inclusive becomes more and more urgent. This sense of urgency plays out across a social and political terrain that threatens the very core of our identity as a nation. Our growing diversity is seen by some as a threat to our national security and as the primary cause behind the displacements and angers being created by the ever growing differences that are dividing our country. Our authors see our growing diversity as a much needed and valued source of energy, creativity and a vital contribution to our capacity to thrive in an especially challenging period in our history and are committed to creating educational environments where people of all backgrounds can thrive.

### **Articles in this Volume**

#### **Inclusion**

The concept of inclusion has often been based on a model that typically devalues the lived experiences and backgrounds of underserved students as deficits that hinder their academic success, while the values, practices, and beliefs of the dominant culture have been elevated as the norm and the end goal of most inclusion efforts. In contrast, the concept of inclusion that you will find in these articles is based on an asset model, one that recognizes the talents and knowledge that all students bring to their college experience as contributions to a new definition of inclusion that understands the history and legacy of exclusion. Inclusion of the kind envisioned in these articles means creating opportunities for people with different backgrounds and ideas to work together in new ways to address the complex, unscripted problems that our communities, our nation and the world face in today's rapidly changing world.

#### **Moral Imagination**

Working together requires both knowledge and empathy and what Martha Nussbaum (1997) has called a "moral imagination." Writing twenty years ago, Nussbaum explored the realities behind our commitment to preparing citizens and what "a good citizen of the present day should be and should know." She foreshadows the world we live in now as "inescapably multicultural and multinational (Nussbaum p. 8)." All of us must learn to act with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the world. (Nussbaum, p. 8).

From our beginnings as a nation, education has played a vital role in preparing a growing population drawn from many parts of the world to learn together, work together and solve their differences in mutually respectful and democratic ways. We have too often fallen short in our aspirations to achieve *e pluribus unum*. Our situation today is especially frightening. As Erika Christakis (2017) wrote in a recent article in *The Atlantic*, "Across the political spectrum, Americans have declared [our public schools] a failure. But we've underestimated their strengths—and forgotten their purpose." The same can be said for our nation's colleges and universities. Increasingly, we are being considered by policymakers and families as a private

good, not a public resource. Yet, we, too, serve a vital “nation binding” public purpose, to educate a diverse citizenry and to contribute knowledge and skill drawn from many cultures and experiences to the solution of the complex problems of our times.

### Urban Ecosystem

Our urban and metropolitan universities enjoy an especially complex and intimate relationship with the urban environments in which we live, learn and work. While institutions of higher learning were once enclaves separated from the community around them, our boundaries are now increasingly porous. The physical and social spaces that surround us offer a complex urban ecosystem from which we can draw an increasingly diverse group of students, all of whom will need to develop the skill to navigate a multicultural world, wherever they choose to go after college. We are being shaped by those connections as we seek to contribute to community building both as a good neighbor and as active members of our communities through partnerships and collaborations with other organizations.

Our own physical environments, our demographic profiles and our interests and purposes are shaped by our urban context. At the same time, our institutions often seem like kitchen middens made up of a complex collection of organizational philosophies and practices that have piled up over the years and that often represent the lives and perspectives of a different group of people than those who lead our institutions, teach in them and learn in them today. This issue of *Metropolitan Universities* journal is devoted to both conceptual models and practical experience applied to the task of creating equitable and inclusive learning environments that are linked in meaningful ways to the lives and concerns of the people we serve both on campus and beyond.

### Inclusive Excellence

Our urban colleges and universities have long reflected the experiences and interests of the diverse urban communities that surround them. Increasingly, the world has come to us to be educated and to practice the habits of working together in new ways. In this issue of *Metropolitan Universities* journal, you will learn about ways that several urban campuses are creating equitable environments and providing learning that rests upon a foundation of diversity. Diversity has become an essential ingredient in creating a meaningful education in a multicultural and multinational world and in supporting inclusive excellence (AAC&U 2017a). There is much more to be done to reimagine how our colleges and universities, most of them designed and operated according to the expectations of earlier and less diverse generations, can educate for today’s world and draw upon the cultural assets and talents of all of the campus community in equitable and meaningful ways. These articles document a promising start to this effort.

Our campuses are becoming places where our growing diversity of background, experience and interests are becoming the essential ingredients of an equitable and inclusive community. The articles in this issue share a common assumption that our campuses and the communities around us are complex systems (Cilliers 1998) where small changes can cascade through the community in unexpected and unintended ways, where the connections amongst the elements

that make up our campuses can interact in surprising ways or not at all, where we are increasingly influenced by and open to the world around us.

## Design Thinking

In attempting to change the behavior of a complex human system, our authors make clear that attention must be paid to a number of critical elements involving both people and place and the culture we have created within our institutions. One way of doing this is to employ design thinking as a strategy for understanding, and then influencing, an organization's behavior and culture (Brown, Tim 2009). This careful study and exploration sets the stage for creating the capacity to look at every aspect of campus life through an equity lens. Our policies and practices, the design of our physical spaces and our use of social media all play a role in shaping our campus cultures and our responses to the new ideas and questions that arise when we become more diverse. These elements shape how we teach, how we design the curriculum, what we expect of ourselves and our students, the questions we ask as scholars, and the choices we make as educators.

In this issue, you will see the challenging environment and landscape of higher education through the eyes of senior administrators, faculty members, students, faculty development experts and community members. All of these bring fresh perspectives to the task of creating a culture of equity and inclusion in higher education. In all of these approaches, you will see an interesting blend of deeper probing into how our minds work and how to practice new habits of thinking and action that draw people of different backgrounds together to work on problems that cannot be solved through a single discipline or social perspective alone. You will also see attention to the nature of the environment, both physical and cultural, in which these efforts are unfolding. Frequent reference is made to concepts such as thinking of an institution as a complex system (Cotter, 1998), the use of an ethical lens to examine how the policies and practices of an institution shape what is possible and what is difficult, to the challenge of addressing implicit bias and to the role of leadership and example as a powerful influence on what members of a community value and how they interact with each other and the impact of the growth of equity and inclusion on the experiences and choices being made by students.

This issue's manuscripts start with a broad, system-wide view of an institution and all of the complex connections and interactions that create and sustain its culture, then move to an exploration of what motivates each member of a campus community and how our unexamined and often implicit biases affect what we pay attention to, how we respond to others and what we consider to be important. The issue closes with a focus on how our efforts to become more committed to equity and inclusion ourselves is affecting our students and how they are using their knowledge and skill to address issues that matter to them.

The path begins with Frank Golom's article on whole system change. Golom explores the reasons why we have made so little demonstrable progress in creating equity and inclusion, despite the fact that our campus communities and society as a whole have been growing more diverse every year. He argues that one explanation for our failure to change is that our approaches to diversity and inclusion overemphasize individual actors, attitudes and behavior. They fail to take into account the influence of larger organizational dynamics that favor some

actions and discourage others. Golom goes on to offer three different frames through which to view our approach to campus diversity work—contextual, multilevel and complex systems thinking.

Zapata, Percy and Andrews provide a complementary way to think systemically. They describe how Portland State University approached the task of updating its strategic plan. This effort took place in an environment shaped by a newly appointed governing board that was feeling its way, resource shortages created by reductions in state general fund support, enrollment swings and student activism in support of equity. An equity lens was used to test the likely consequences, including unintended outcomes of policy and strategic choices being considered as the strategic plan took shape. Equity emerged not only as one of the five goals of the plan but also as a commitment to applying an equity lens to every significant campus decision. The authors offer an honest portrayal of how this process unfolded and advice for others who are considering taking the same approach. This example of explicit attention to the potential impact of every choice on the experiences and well-being of the entire campus community is being explored by other institutions as well and may provide a new and more intentional way to address the whole system change that Golom calls for in his article.

So far, we have looked at ways to adapt our traditional organizational cultures, policy environments and approaches to learning, in order to meet the needs of a changing student body and the increasingly complex social, economic and environmental problems that we and our graduates will face in the future. In sharp contrast, Michelle Jones, the founding President of a brand new two-year college called The Wayfinding Academy, shares her experience in creating an educational environment from scratch. Freed from many of the constraints of tradition and history, she and her colleagues are doing their best to avoid the limitations that institutions with much longer history are facing as they try to change their ways to promote equity and inclusion. The Wayfinding Academy is only in its second year and is therefore very much a work in progress.

With the goal clearly articulated of taking an approach to building upon diversity to achieve true equity and inclusion, the next step is to explore how individual interests, beliefs, attitudes and skills play out in the context of the whole campus environment in which people interact with each other. The next two articles focus on the role of chief diversity officers as key campus leaders. President Merodie Hancock describes how she has sought to leverage the chief diversity officer role in creating an equitable and inclusive environment within SUNY Empire State College, an institution whose role and structure have continued to develop since its foundation in 1971. Empire State is nonresidential; its facilities are spread across the state in 34 academic centers. In this widely distributed environment, Empire State hired its first chief diversity officer in 2016. Hancock describes how today's urban and access-oriented campus chief diversity officers work in partnership with the rest of the senior leadership team and faculty, staff and student leadership to educate communities on and off campus about the importance of a broader investment in building upon our growing diversity to create equitable and inclusive environments. She offers a powerful argument for the benefits of this approach in terms of increased educational attainment, greater civic engagement, robust economic development and more livable communities.

Contrasting with the widely distributed structure of Empire State College, Carmen Suarez, Myron Anderson and Kathryn Young take the reader on an exploration of how two different urban-serving universities, Metropolitan State University of Denver (a regional comprehensive University) and Portland State University (a Research 1 University), have begun to incorporate an equity perspective in different environments with a common overall urban-serving mission. Many campuses, including these two, have chosen to embrace materials from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) that support the development of equity and inclusive excellence. The ability to compare and contrast the strategies used by these two institutions offers some insights into ways to address very different campus communities and the changing role of the Chief Diversity Office in supporting these different approaches to meaningful institutional change.

Campuses vary in how they focus their efforts to draw upon the strength offered by diversity. Andrew Furco and Kristin Lockhart draw us into the context of the University of Minnesota to explore how to create intercultural understanding. This approach offers insights into how to create a sense of shared purpose in a large and multifaceted environment. Several different administrative and academic units are working to define, interpret and approach intercultural work. This is a case study of how two associate vice presidents, one responsible for addressing issues of equity and diversity across the institution, and the other responsible for advancing the institution's community and public engagement agenda, worked together to build greater multicultural competency campus-wide. As is often the case, these two units had not actually worked together on a regular basis. In this story, we learn how the slow and sometimes painful process of learning to work together in new and more productive ways unfolded. These two units created a collective agenda by (a) taking the time to reconcile difference in both perspectives and intended outcomes; (b) defining the terms of engagement; (c) infusing new perspectives into the effort; and (d) accepting the inevitable tensions that arose due to differences of role, responsibility and experience. Several of the articles in this issue offer wise and helpful insights into what it really takes to change a culture. This piece offers an especially helpful and informative insider's view of the realities of undertaking this kind of work with the goal of achieving a culture of equity and inclusion and intercultural competence when everyone has a different idea about what each of these terms means in practice.

Once a campus community has figured out how to approach the task of creating equity and inclusion, they must deal with two critical issues. The first is the lack of meaningful connections across the campus community, what Richard Prystowsky, the former Provost of Lansing Community College and now Vice President of Academic Affairs and Student Services at Marion Technical College in Ohio, calls the "structure of isolation common in our institutions of higher learning." These are what others often call silos. The second is our failure to address our own implicit biases honestly and successfully, biases that further divide us into separate groups. Prystowsky offers a helpful primer on how to read a campus environment, work out how it operates and discover what interventions might shift how people work together, how they learn and what they value most. He describes the impact of implicit bias training on the curriculum, on campus policies, on faculty searches and promotion and tenure deliberations. He offers an example of how Golom's call to approach change as a whole system can play out in a different campus environment.

Creating new connections and addressing our own implicit biases require fresh ways of reading the environment around us, as well as ways to explore the assumptions that we rarely, if ever, examine. Balajee and Todd offer a primer on how to slow down and focus on ways to build a new approach to seeing and experiencing the realities of our campus context and examine our own roles in shaping the campus climate and culture. Their experiences with efforts to support equity and inclusion in other settings shapes their ability to see a campus from the perspective of “outside insiders” who are not bound by the unexamined patterns and expectations that academics take for granted.

### Identity-Consciousness

Kimberly Costino takes us more deeply into the importance of faculty learning in creating an equity-minded institutional transformation and leads us through the steps along the way, approaches to the curriculum and the ways that faculty can be supported in exploring their own assumptions in order to foster their own identity-consciousness. This inquiry-based approach addresses how faculty members can probe more deeply into their own ways of understanding the world and the actions of others and their access to and use of power. This can then flow into understanding the institutionalized behaviors that contribute to alienation, inequity and failure to thrive in the academic environment, and the role that the campus culture and environment play in contributing to student success.

Finally, we wrap up this exploration with two articles that address the landscape of higher education from the perspective of students and recent graduates. Mary Ho and George Sanchez describe the approaches that the University of Southern California (USC) has taken to providing support for first generation students of color. The story is told through both an institutional equity-minded lens and through individual students’ experiences, and how they have been able to connect their educational experiences to issues they care about in the communities from which they came. This article paves the way to think about how the kinds of support offered by urban institutions like USC tap the remarkable assets of cultural knowledge, talents and commitments that first-generation students of color bring with them to college, and help students choose a focus for what they want to do with their new connections and knowledge. The result is a set of inspiring examples of how insights and learning can be put to use to benefit others. One example, bringing together learning and community engagement at USC, is the Boyle Heights Museum of History and Culture, a central point for the community surrounding USC as well as a training ground for the next group of professionals who will emerge from USC’s first generation college student community of color. As Ho and Sanchez describe it, civic engagement can disrupt traditional divides and open up new ways to celebrate and support the identity and distinctive character of a neighborhood and a broader community while preparing students to be engaged and mindful citizens who can use their education in responsible and creative ways.

To bring the issue to a close, Jacinta Safford describes how interdisciplinary departments such as African American Studies and Women and Gender Studies and initiatives like those at USC can prepare scholars of color who are pursuing careers in higher education. She looks at these intellectual centers as incubators that teach participants how to navigate within our current university environments while working toward spaces of greater equity and inclusion. She ends with a challenge to all of us.

It is not enough to be diverse in representation—that is not the heavy lifting of diversity. Rather, finding a common language that allows each of us to bear witness to the humanity in others is the real challenge, especially for colleges and universities (Safford 2017, p. 7).

## **Conclusion**

The articles in this issue spark difficult, but necessary, conversations that lead to action. As you read this issue, we hope that you consider the following questions: What lies ahead of us as we undertake this journey towards nation building in an increasingly complex and interconnected world both locally and globally? What will our graduates need to know and how will they use what they know both in the workplace and in their own lives as members of a community, as family members, as mentors for others? What kinds of questions must we answer and how will we set about the task of answering them? How will our universities and society at large interact? Will our role still be to serve a critical public purpose, the binding together of an increasingly diverse population into a meaningful democracy? We hope so!



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