Chapter 10
Post–COVID Lesson Learned:
The New Look of DEI

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ABSTRACT

Reimagining diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) became a high priority and central in WGU's strategic plan including successes, lessons learned, and opportunities to make an even greater impact for faculty, staff, students, and communities. In this chapter, per the authors, WGU's wins, lessons learned, and opportunities to make an even greater impact for faculty, staff, students, and stakeholders are explored. Higher education institutions and businesses alike realized an inclusive workplace where employees feel they can be their authentic selves was necessary to attract the best talent and foster greater innovation. Although WGU was more uniquely positioned to host DEI initiatives, strategies, and trainings virtually, there were still many lessons to be learned.

INTRODUCTION

Change happens when people come together as a community. People need a safe space to dialog, explore, and understand the heterogenous world in which work is done. All people want to be seen, heard, and respected for who they are and for what they bring to the table regardless of their race, ethnicity, orientation, or beliefs. Black Lives Matter (BLM), Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI), LatinX, people who are differently abled or neurodiverse, LGBTQ and so many more have this in common; the intrinsic need for groups to support one another through cross-community allyships, like Dignity Health's motto, "Hello Human Kindness" (Dignity Health, 2021).

COVID-19 and major social justice events, including the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many others, became the catalyzing events of 2020. Key components of successful business tactics were rethought and adapted to respond to the realities of a pandemic and social justice protests. Universities and educational systems were not immune and student leaning was directly impacted (Kuhfeld, et al., 2020). These events forced companies and universities to develop strategic plans that looked remarkably different than prior years. Reimagining Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) became a high priority and central in many improvement plans.

The realities of these protests and questions about social justice and equity could not be ignored. Leaders and companies were forced to have tough conversations about race, equity, and social justice. Traditionally most organizations assumed all DE&I training needed to be in person, as DE&I training and workshops had often been thought of as small group conversations where people needed to meet in the same room (Vaughn, 2007). It had generally been assumed that empathy and compassion required not just proximity, but also understanding that having difficult conversations about race required a safe space, that often in-person environments do better at providing spots for minoritized and/or victimized populations to share and feel vulnerable with others.

In 2020 in-person training was no longer available due to the pandemic. Travel restrictions, global stay at home orders, and the transition of many employees to working from home required DE&I training to shift formats. Working from home became the norm not the exception. Leaders and companies were now struggling with questions like: How can employees have 'tough conversations' without being in the same room? How can underrepresented groups feel a sense of community within the organization with everyone working from home? How do stakeholders have the necessary conversations in a way that is inclusive to all stakeholders? These questions were at the forefront of many conversations. Never had the country struggled with a pandemic, which required transitioning employees to their homes, while simultaneously navigating major social justice issues. Western Governors University (WGU), like most universities and businesses, had to move quickly and respond to the country's new perspective about an existing reality, especially for underrepresented and marginalized groups. Although a good percentage of WGU employees were already working remote, WGU transitioned the remainder of its in-office employees to a fully remote situation. WGU's culture was impacted in many aspects, including town halls, messaging, and employee onboarding. Although WGU was more uniquely positioned to deliver education virtually, there were still many lessons to be learned. Reimagining Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) became a high priority and central to WGU's strategic plan including successes, lessons learned, and opportunities to make an even greater impact for faculty, staff, students and communities.

HISTORY OF DIVERSITY IN ORGANIZATIONS

The importance of inclusion has long been a key factor in corporate America. In 1961 President Kennedy signed into law Executive Order 10925 that stated "The contractor will take affirmative action to ensure that applicants are employed, and that employees are treated during employment, without regard to their race, creed, color or national origin" (Affirmative, 2021; para 2). Yet organizations quickly found that affirmative action was just a small step in a much larger need for action. According to Anand and Winters (2008) "…diversity training in the corporate arena has a checkered history and a plethora of critics who are convinced that such efforts are a waste of time" (p.356).

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