Cultural Humility as a Path to Equity in Higher Education

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Achieving equity in higher education involves more than just closing achievement gaps and mitigating the impact of historic oppression and underrepresentation. In this chapter, the author presents a framework for cultural humility as a pathway to equity for institutions of education, as well as an approach for the professional development of cultural humility practitioners. The cultural humility framework comprises four core principles as well as five transformational skills (i.e., dialogue, inquiry, self-reflection, conflict transformation, and identity negotiation). The chapter concludes with a discussion about how to implement this framework at both the classroom and institutional levels, as well as the implications of such training for achieving greater equity in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

The California Community Colleges (CCC) system, which has voiced a long-standing commitment to students' success, is also the largest community college system in the United States, with 116 campuses, serving 2.1 million students (CCC, 2021). Like many similar tone-setting and political stances that have originated in California, the CCC's commitment to equity has shaped a movement to minimize educational achievement (and opportunity) gaps. However, that commitment has not moved the needle, so to speak, in any considerable way. California's success rate mirrors the national average, and although many California colleges have initiated strategies for closing achievement/opportunity gaps and ending racial disparities, the racist policies that produced those inequities continue to thrive (Ross, 2016).

Some wonder why racial disparities for Black and Brown students and employees are so difficult to unearth and redress. The answer is that these disparities are the result of centuries-old principles and practices that have been baked into the system and made invisible to even the most just-minded educator. For example, Peele and Willis (2021) pointed out that while more than 70% of CCC students are from diverse (i.e., non-White) racial and ethnic backgrounds, 60% of CCC faculty statewide are White. They

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blamed this situation on antiquated state regulations that fail to provide sufficient funding to diversify college faculty, despite the best intentions of many within today's educational systems. In fact, achieving equity requires more than just closing gaps and mitigating the impact of historic oppression and underrepresentation; it requires deeply personal and committed effort on the part of educators, as individuals and as a community. Only by reforming and re-envisioning diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training can it be expected to effectively address the four domains of oppression, which have been delineated as intrapersonal, interpersonal, systemic/institutional, structural/cultural (see Gutiérrez et al., 1995).

In this chapter, the author discusses equity as a lens through which educators can make sense of injustice and fairness in the world, through which they can go beyond customary definitions of equity and the illusion of inclusion. She presents an overview of *cultural humility* (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) as a pathway to equity that enables institutions of education to enhance DEI training by targeting the four domains of oppression. The author then presents a framework for professional development training focused on cultural humility. She discusses how to implement this training at a classroom and institutional level, as well as implications for the future of education. While she does not address formal requirements (e.g., certification or licensure requirements) to better ensure that DEI training meets its foundational goal of greater equity, she recognizes the need to hold DEI practitioners accountable for their own personal and professional growth so they can responsibly and ethically support their clients or training participants.

BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM

A decade ago, Linton (2011) defined equity in education as "*all* students succeeding, especially when measured according to differences such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, language, family background" (p. xiii). According to Linton:

This effort has been traditionally referenced as "closing the achievement gaps" between students from the dominant White middle-class norm and students from traditionally underserved or oppressed populations. Building equity in education shifts the focus of responsibility for academic achievement from the students to the professional administrators and teachers who are the educators in the school. Students have to do their part, but the adults in the building need to teach in a way so that all students can succeed. (p. xiii)

Over the past decade, it has become increasingly clear that efforts to ensure equity must go beyond just aiming to close achievement gaps. To return to the example of California, repeated calls to action by the Foundation for California Community Colleges (n.d.), Campaign for College Opportunity (2019), and others in the state led to funding for large-scale change initiatives centered on student equity and closing racial achievement gaps. Campuses received millions to restructure, realign, reimagine, and redress issues of inequity throughout the CCC system. However, the Campaign for College Opportunity's "California Higher Education Report Card" gave the state an overall GPA of only 2.07 for these efforts. These initiatives had some impact on processes and restructuring but far less (if any) on faculty members' motivation, commitment, understanding, and professional development. Instead, a false urgency was created that kept college employees running from meeting to meeting, developing report after report, giving presentation after presentation, but with dwindling investment, personal transformation, and alignment with long-term sustainability.