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Chapter 6

Demystifying Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Among Students in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the unique components of diversity, equity, and inclusion is essential for institutions of higher education to increase student success outcomes and to prepare graduates for the world of work. This chapter will focus on how diversity, equity, and inclusion as a single entity is perceived by enrolled students, particularly minority students, and how institutions may help to increase students' awareness of such topics and the impact on their lives upon graduation. Discussions will lend themselves to strategies that institutions may employ to demystify these terms for enrolled students. Specific focus will be given to the use of inclusive competencies and methods institutions may implore to promote inclusive practice. Implications will be provided on how colleges and universities may develop innovative strategies to increase student engagement centered on these concepts and provide opportunities for students to share their experiences and ideas for integration on their respective campuses.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's society, the terms diversity, equity, and inclusion are often spoken of in varying organizations, both public and private, including corporations and institutions of higher education. Because these terms are typically coined in a single phrase, they are sometimes considered a single entity or having very similar definitions if viewed differently. However, by definition and through practice, each term has a distinct meaning. These differences often yield varying perspectives and outcomes, which sometimes cause institutions difficulty utilizing them collectively towards organizational success. While understanding the unique components of diversity, equity, and inclusion is essential for organizational success, it is even more vital for institutions of higher education as these entities provide graduates trained to enter the workforce each year. Furthermore, it is critically important that graduates have a complete understanding of what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean as an enrolled student and the impact that it may have as they broach the world of work. On the one hand, the authors of this chapter discovered that students could not articulate the meaning of these terms collectively nor the impact they may have on their respective disciplines. On the other hand, students are incredibly passionate about equity and diversity and its impact on society as a whole.

This book chapter will focus on how diversity, equity, and inclusion as a single entity is perceived by enrolled students, particularly minority students, and how institutions may help to increase students' awareness of such topics and the impact on their lives upon graduation. Discussions will lend themselves to strategies that institutions may employ to demystify these terms for students. Specific focus will be given to inclusive competencies and how institutions may develop methods to promote inclusive practice. Implications will be further provided on inquiry and research for colleges and universities seeking to create innovative strategies to increase student engagement in holistic conversations at their campuses with peers and campus administrators. Practical recommendations will be shared for college administrators, faculty, and staff who work directly with students on techniques they may use to demystify negative connotations further. Contributions to this book chapter bring personal and professional gratification to the authors, who are administrators and faculty at Historically Black College and Universities (HBCU) and a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), that serve populations with large numbers of minority students, where these concepts could be perceived differently. Developing strategies to increase understanding and mechanisms to employ them to strengthen outcomes towards diversity, equity effectively, and inclusion will help students in their current learning environment and help them strive in the workplace after graduation.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION DEFINED

Generally speaking, diversity is often defined using terms associated with race, gender, and ethnicity. It may also include components related to cultural, religious, sexual orientation, and international identities (Burbules, 2021; Zemrani, A., Trent, D. L., & Abutasbenjah, S., 2020; Weimer & Zemrani, 2017). Equity may be defined in terms of how individuals and groups are treated, meaning fairly and justly. Inclusion, we surmise, is an attempt to ensure that different groups and individuals sense a feeling of belonging. Inclusive competencies focus on students' perceptions of themselves, and views of cultural competency related to interacting with diverse and complex group dynamics (Lahiri, 2008). We recognize that these definitions could differ depending on the circumstance and venue in which they are used. In higher education, because administrators, students, faculty, and staff come from all walks of life, it is difficult to coin a single definition of these terms when used collectively. However, for this chapter, the authors will utilize a working definition for diversity, equity, and inclusion: *Fair and just treatment of different groups of people regardless of personal identification or association to create a sense of belonging.* This definition we believe is essential when working in higher education where people have a cadre of backgrounds and experiences. It is also critically important for academic and student affairs administrators who employ strategies to create an atmosphere where students feel they belong.

A CASE STUDY: PERSPECTIVES OF STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Summary of Research Methodology

Of interest to the authors of this chapter is the sense of belonging, diversity, and inclusion and its impact on students enrolled at institutions with large minority populations, such as HBCUs and HSIs. To further highlight the importance of the work around diversity, equity, and inclusion within postsecondary institutions, the authors of this chapter have employed a case study approach to provide insights into how colleges and universities may utilize various strategies to create an inclusive atmosphere for minority students. The case study approach is advantageous when seeking to obtain a thorough appreciation of an event, issue, or phenomenon of interest, in its natural, real-life context (Crowe, S., Cresswell, K., Robertson, A. *et al*, 2011). The case study was developed from a course taught on Ethics and Public Service in the context of assessing, evaluating, and creating inclusive competencies. Inclusive competencies are critical at a time in the United States where attention to

race and social justice is heightened. It is essential as higher education institutions are training students to enter a world filled with racial divide and inequities. Learning how to manage one's emotions and strive in this environment is more a necessity than a luxury. However, before institutions can help students navigate a world of conflict based on differences in personal opinions and ideology, it helps to understand students' views related to the concept of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

To that end, we utilized students' responses to an Inclusion Competencies Inventory (ICI) (Kozai Group, 2021), given in an ethics course at an HSI, to gauge their viewpoints and perceptions in three specific areas:

1. **Knowing Yourself:** Your awareness of "who you are" and your sensitivity to your social tendencies, as well as your likelihood to be emotionally resilient in challenging contexts.
2. **Knowing Others:** Your interest in and actions to develop relationships with people who differ from you and your ability to understand them.
3. **Bridging Differences:** Your interest in multiple perspectives and your ability to see and value them and be sensitive to the inequities present in many contexts.

More than seventy-four (74) participants were invited to complete the Inclusion Competencies Inventory during the first week of the course. All students responded to the survey as it was a required component of the course. The ICI was designed by the Kozai Group (2021) to help identify what capabilities one would bring to the challenge of being more inclusive and the steps one can take to develop inclusion competencies. For the ethics course in which it was disseminated, materials were gathered in student portfolios and reviewed using the rubric below as shown in Table 1 (Cartwright, 2021).

Upon completion of the ICI, an individual report was generated for each student and shared with them. Students were then tasked with completing a journal log and participating in the instructor's coaching sessions. The coaching sessions were used to assimilate the results and use the experience for inclusion competencies development throughout the course. Utilizing the data, students reflected on their competencies and then developed a personal plan for growth.

In developing their personal development plan, students were advised to use their results and compare their ratings to peers and assess if their perceptions were rated low, moderate, or high compared to the dimensions of the ICI, as shown below in Table 2.

Demystifying Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Among Students in Higher Education

Table 1. Inclusion Competencies Inventory Rubric

	LOW	MODERATE	HIGH
Openness to Change	Report much less concern or interest in being open to change and investing in self-development. As a result, generally not adept at adapting to diverse social contexts.	Somewhat interested in self-development and being open to changing to an evolving social environment. Fairly able to adapt to challenging situations, both of a physical and social type.	Quite open to change and self-development. Seek new learning experiences and willing and able to adjust to changing circumstances in order to adapt to new challenges that confront them.
Adaptability	Find new experiences to be psychologically and emotionally challenging and energy-depleting, resulting in a limited ability to remain open to others, a lessened interest in learning about and from those with different beliefs and values, and reduced motivation to develop relationships with them.	Generally able to maintain a stable emotional self under moderate levels of pressure and respond to situations with self-restraint. Manage negative emotions when under duress fairly well and maintain a moderately healthy attitude and perspective in difficult situations.	Easily cope well with challenging emotional situations. Recover quickly from setbacks and are able to continue their efforts to accomplish challenging tasks, including interacting with people who differ from them. Maintain a healthy attitude and perspective even in difficult situations.
Connecting with Others	Report little desire to learn about and understand diverse types of people. Tend to be satisfied with their current relationships and put little effort into interacting with or developing friendships with people different from themselves.	Moderately interested in getting to know people unlike them, but this could be more circumstantial than intentional. Feel comfortable with people outside their usual network but tend to be less comfortable with those who are significantly different from them.	Very interested in learning about, and proactive in getting to know, people who are different from them. Highly motivated to develop and maintain such relationships.
Reading Others	Report limited interest or awareness of how others feel or think. More attentive to their own thoughts and feelings than observing others to determine theirs. Generally, less inclined to respond with empathy.	Possess some ability to perceive and decipher verbal and nonverbal cues of people unlike themselves. Fairly accurate interpretations and conclusions from these cues can facilitate interactions with different others but might impede their ability to respond with empathy.	Very aware of and sensitive to the emotions and feelings of people different from them. Can detect disconnects between a person's words and feelings. Closely observers verbal and nonverbal cues that might indicate true thoughts and feelings. More likely to respond with empathy.
Valuing Different Perspectives	Report little or no interest in learning from the perspectives of people unlike themselves or in understanding the logic underpinning their views. Have difficulty accepting as correct any perspectives other than their own.	Generally comfortable around people different from them and expect to encounter different perspectives. Sometimes seek to understand the perspectives and logic behind those others' perspectives but do not always value them.	Very comfortable around people different from them. Highly skilled at listening to diverse voices and perspectives. Frequently attempt to learn from diverse viewpoints and fully understand the logic supporting them.

Continued on following page

Table 1. Continued

	LOW	MODERATE	HIGH
Power Sensitivity	Generally unaware of the impact of power dynamics among different groups. More likely to assume life is generally fair and people are solely responsible for their station in life. Unlikely to see how behaviors/decisions contribute to disadvantage people and marginalized groups.	Somewhat aware of power dynamics. Can sometimes perceive how power creates differential benefits among individuals or groups, yet not well-attuned to the presence of power and its overall impact. Able to see somewhat how behaviors/decisions disadvantage or marginalize some people and groups.	Highly attentive to the presence of power dynamics. Keen appreciation for the advantages that some people benefit from in life and for the systemic disadvantages that others experience. Very capable of seeing how behaviors/decisions disadvantage or marginalize some people and groups.

Table 2. ICI Dimensions

KNOWING YOURSELF	KNOWING OTHERS	BRIDGING DIFFERENCES
Self-Awareness	Connecting with Others	Valuing Different Perspectives
Emotional Resilience	Emotional Sensitivity	Power Sensitivity

Framework for Understanding ICI Scores

With the ICI, students utilized the different dimensions to understand the total ICI score. Students were informed that the results were based on perceptions of themselves when the survey was taken. It was noted that large swings in mood or lack of careful attention when answering the survey questions could result in misrepresentations in their profiles. Regarding the specific ratings of low, moderate, and high, the following ratings were used to help students further understand their scores.

- Bar ends in column 1-2 (Low) of the Connecting with Others (CO) dimension. It would be accurate to conclude that you might need to work on this competency more than most people. If you fall into column 1, this means “I do this a little, but nowhere near as often as other people do.” If it’s column 2, it means, “I could be worse off, but I guess I don’t pay much attention to this.” Specifically, your self-reflection for low results might be something like, “I probably need to work on taking a greater interest in people who are different from me.”

Demystifying Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Among Students in Higher Education

- If your CO result is in columns 3-5 (Medium), it means your answers on the items in this dimension are about the same as most other people who have taken the ICI. If you fall into column 3, this means “I’m pretty normal but on the low side.” If you fall into column 4, this means “I’m average, like most people.” If it’s column 5, you could say, “I’m pretty normal on this, but on the high side.” For moderate results, your self-reflection might be “I do show interest in others who are different from me, but I could improve if I want to develop more diverse relationships.”
- If you ended up in columns 6-7 (High) for CO, your result is higher than most other people who have taken the ICI. If it’s column 6, it means “I get this right most of the time.” If it’s column 7, you could say, “Wow, I’m good at this, compared to others!” Your self-reflection for high results might be, “I show greater interest in having diverse associations than most people. I could always improve, but it might make more sense to leverage or take advantage of this strength more than I am already doing.” For those in column 7, it’s worth asking, “Do I also need to be aware that some people who are different from me might not always appreciate my keen interest and be sensitive to that?”

Student Perceptions and Insights

Seventy-four students completed the ICI to help the institution determine their perceptions surrounding the concept of diversity, equity, and inclusion. A sample of students’ responses used to develop their personal plan is provided in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Sample of Students’ ICI Results



From the sample scoring, students ranked the areas of “Knowing Others, Emotional Sensitivity, and Power Sensitivity the highest. Self-awareness was the next highest ranking after these three categories. The authors note these areas as examples, but why would comprehension of these scores be important to institutions?

Each dimension is important to consider while looking at the results. For example, without self-awareness, it is very difficult to self-regulate and know when we need to change our attitudes and behaviors. In the context of inclusion among students and institutions of higher education, a comprehensive understanding of the results helps students to understand that behavior influences the reactions of those around us, whether good or bad. If we are unaware of the beliefs that influence our behavior, which attracts or alienates those around us, or unaware of our strengths and weaknesses, we cannot strategically alter those tendencies to be more effective.

The second dimension to examine is Emotional Resilience. This dimension is particularly important in an environment where students, faculty, and administrators come from all walks of life. Working in a diverse setting with people with different backgrounds may pose challenges and sometimes require compromise. The challenge can be greater if others don’t share our experiences, values or beliefs, or when we seek to find equitable solutions and treatment for everyone. We are called upon to think differently, act differently, develop new relationships, and learn new ways of working together. When the inevitable mistakes from living, working, and playing in diverse contexts occur, the ability to assume the other party’s good intent and to bounce back and learn from our errors is crucial. Helping students to understand that capacity to cope with these challenges, while maintaining physical and psychological health, is crucial to developing and maintaining healthy relationships and academic success.

Other dimensions, such as power sensitivity, are equally important. This dimension measures the degree of interest in power dynamics in both organizational structures and individual relationships. Specifically, it assesses the awareness of the impact of power and privilege on inclusion and equity. But why is power sensitivity important to the work of inclusion? We surmise that in every social system, be it a social group, a workplace, or a government, there is a power structure. To address inequity in laws, policies, and practices, we must recognize where power is located and how it might need to shift. This concept is important as students enter the world of work after graduation and are faced with decisions that may result from factors beyond textbook knowledge but are made because of different authority levels.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS AND FACULTY

Higher education institutions are faced with an enormous challenge to ensure success for students who come from a myriad of backgrounds. They are faced with the challenge of offering a curriculum that keeps pace with the changing dynamics of the workforce. Institutions across the country utilize various retention strategies to increase student success. Many of them are successful, and some require retooling based on the majority populations for which institutions serve. One method recommended in this chapter is the use of tools that will help gauge students' perceptions of diversity, equity, and inclusion. We have offered here that the use of an Inclusion Competency Inventory may be one method to obtain insight into what students know about themselves, what they know about others, and how they might consider bridging differences between the two.

Administrators may use the scores of the ICI not only to help students in individual classes develop personal goals for themselves but also more broadly to impact a more significant number of students. Scores from the ICI may aid institutions in determining gaps in knowledge and fill voids through curriculum modifications, particularly if large numbers of students scored with low ratings. For institutions that have a majority of students with medium scores, this suggests that students may already appreciate the differences they find in others but see room for improvement. From an institutional perspective, university leaders may seek creative programs that offer students increased opportunities to expand their experiences related to diversity, equity, and inclusion. Lastly, for large groups scoring high on the ICI, it's admirable to note that these students may already have a keen interest and awareness of issues related to creating a just and equitable environment for all types of individuals. Institutions with students who scored high may choose to be a model or leader in this space and share some of the programs and methods they are using to encourage these experiences among their students and how they will sustain such a model.

It is also worthy that institutions explore mechanisms for students to share their thoughts and opinions on where change is needed. In *Higher Education Today* (2016), published by the American Council on Education (ACE), a list of students' demands gathered from across seventy-six (76) institutions were provided and ranked by descending percentages. According to student organizers participating in this survey, diversity is shown as the fourth theme at 86% of students demanding increased diversity across the campus community. As noted in their analysis shown in Figure 2, students want to see increased diversification among faculty, students, staff, and administration.

Figure 2. Increasing Diversity - Student Demand Responses

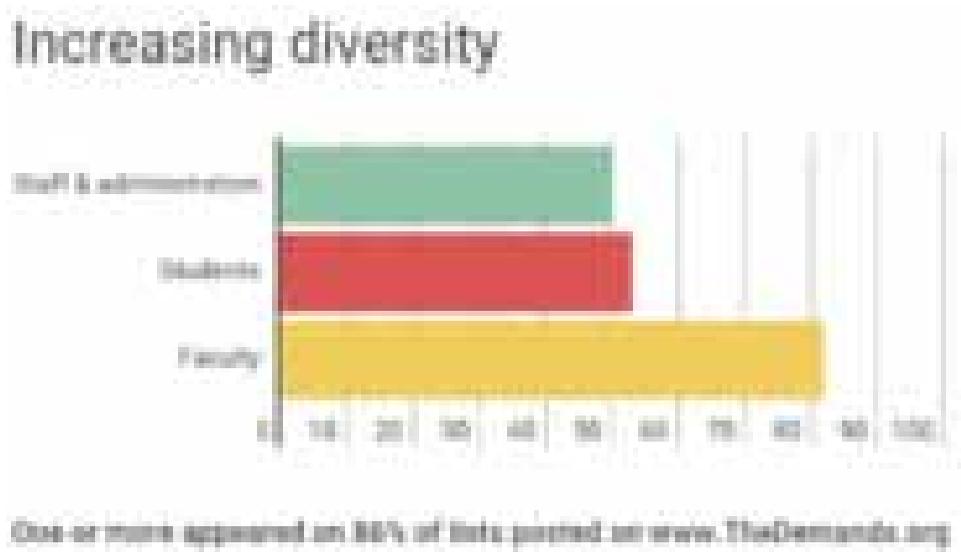


Figure 3. Diversity Training – Student Demand Responses

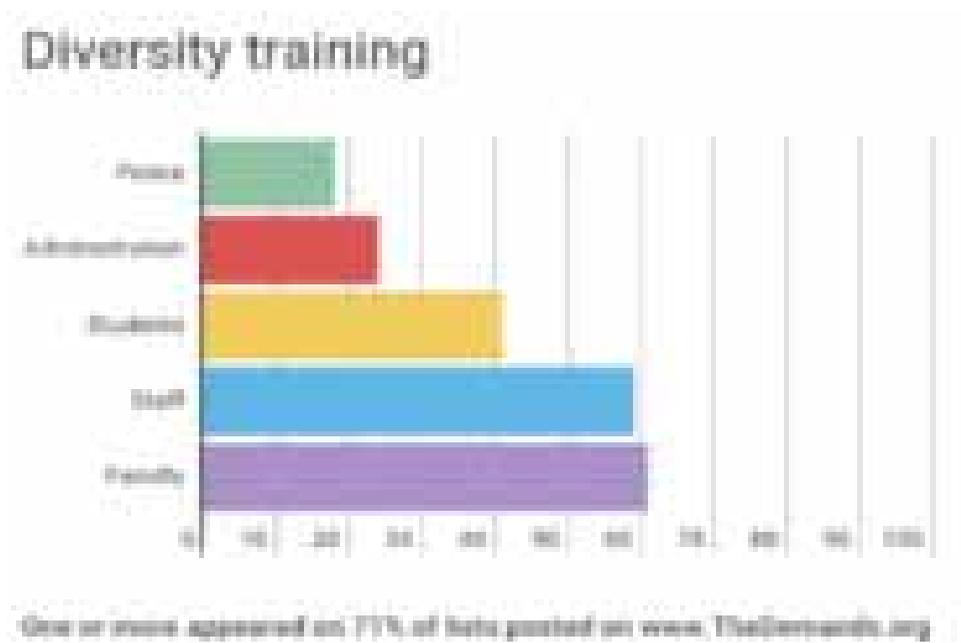
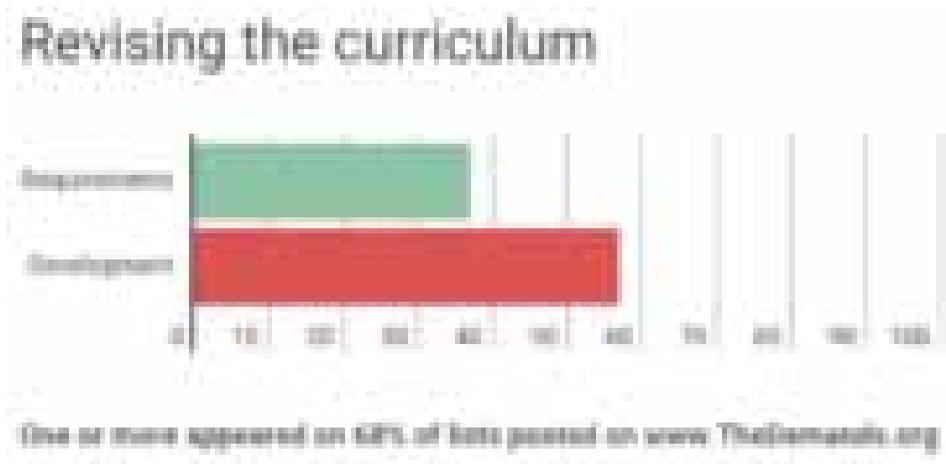


Figure 4. Revising Curriculum – Student Demand Responses



Early on, we referenced the need for increased educational experiences that might lend themselves opportunities to learn from diverse groups of students with the end goal to build a mindset towards inclusion and fairness. Seventy-one percent (71%) of students in this survey agreed that faculty, staff and administration, students, and the police could benefit from cultural competency training as shown below in Figure 3.

Similarly, Figure 4 indicates respondents view on how modifications to the university curriculum (68%) could further the cause towards diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, which is consistent with methods proposed by the authors of this chapter.

CONCLUSION

Institutions of higher education offer the perfect rainbow. You have administrators, faculty, staff, and students who bring and offer a wealth of knowledge and experiences to create a well-renowned portrait for the whole world to view. However, making such a unique painting requires years of work and dedication to embrace individuals from varying backgrounds to create a sense of belonging in a just and fair environment. According to a survey conducted by the American Council of Education (2016), students have told us that diversity is essential. We also deduce that equity and inclusion are just as significant. Higher education institutions must be intentional in developing strategies to positively impact student outcomes with particular attention

devoted to enhancing students' experiences as they relate to fair and just treatment of different groups of people regardless of personal identification or association to create a sense of belonging for all groups.

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