

Increasing Diversity and Social Justice in Higher Education

Developed by the Higher Education Committee of the 100 Black Men of America

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Introduction

Efforts to increase diversity have been fraught with challenges across academic, social, and political spheres of higher education. Ongoing debates over what is meant by diversity have delayed or derailed efforts of access and equity. To complicate matters, the term “diverse” has been used as a euphemism for the term “minority” as conservative pundits vilify them and other such terms, including “affirmative action.” Often lost in such debates are: Why diversity in the first place? Is it diversity for the sake of diversity? Is it to educate majority populations in an effort to improve campus climate? Is it, as noted by Michael Nettles (2017), to employ the tools of access and equity to assist the nation in meeting its two most prominent attainment goals: A strong workforce and a healthy society? Most experts agree that all of these questions are important and, further, that the issue of diversity is extremely complex. While we cannot address the full range of issues in this paper, we can address the key issues relative to increasing diversity and social justice in higher education at the campus level.

Historical Context

The 1988 *Educating One-Third of a Nation: The Conference Report* signaled the higher education imperative for what we now refer to as diversity. The following year, the American Council on Education released the first practical guide to assist campuses in their efforts to increase diversity and improve the campus cultural climate. These publications helped spark a series of association reports and monographs, many of which focused on the recruitment and campus climate issues. Many institutions responded by creating a study group or task force. In fact, that was the case with hundreds of institutions across the country in the 1980’s and 1990’s. These early diversity directors, in most institutions, were housed in student affairs. Others were defined more as affirmative action officers, which advised presidents. Such positioning limited the scope of their work to helping minority students cope with often less than welcoming campus environments. Many of these same individuals, however, were pressed into service or held accountable to resolve crises that covered areas beyond their scope or official authority. Campus leaders began to address the issue by elevating the position and creating other positions to address diversity in admissions, faculty and staff hiring and other categories of outreach. Many

established presidential commissions, committees or task forces to guide and monitor their efforts.

With regard to issues of campus climate or inter-group relations, the 1991 Diversity Project Report led by Troy Duster, and his U.C. Berkeley colleagues, characterized experiences of diversity in three stages. “The notion of ‘stage,’ he writes, “does not imply inevitable or linear evolution.” Those stages are listed below:

1. Diversity is an “option” among many campus experiences where all can choose to participate, or not.
2. Diversity is experienced in “separate and competitive enclaves” where minority groups compete for scarce resources, time and attention.
3. Diversity is the result of “mutual enhancement” where those in the campus community “come together across different cultural experiences, in that coming together produce an experience that is transcendent, greater than the sum of the individual parts.”

All these years later, this diversity stage theory still has relevance. Many campuses continue to struggle in their efforts to reach mutual enhancement. This historical context underscores critical race theory assumptions. For decades, a person's racial background has continued to determine inequality in the United States based on property rights rather than human rights (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In the following sections, the authors highlight the value of increasing diversity and social justice within different functional areas of higher education.

Campus Leadership

In 1989, the American Council on Education published *Minorities on Campus: A Handbook for Enhancing Diversity*, which stated, “Leadership, from the board of Trustees and the president, is essential to deep and lasting change on campus.” It also called for an “integrated approach to change” not just focused on increasing diversity, but also on “Institutional change.”

Several comprehensive research projects on campus diversity issues emerged from that commissioned by the Association American of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), with funding from the Ford Foundation and authored by Williams, Berger, & McClendon (2005). In addressing the educational value of diversity, the research team formulated the concept of “inclusive excellence” to capture the essence of its work and bridge the gap between access and excellence.

More recently, Chief diversity officer type positions have been spreading to campuses across the country at a noticeably rapid rate. A quick review reveals that these positions vary widely in title, scope, reporting lines, authority, and resources. Many institutions have created such positions in response to events, statements or actions that disrupted or threatened the veneer of racial

harmony that campus hope for and need to continue to attract students, faculty and staff of all levels from racial or ethnic groups that are underrepresented in higher education.

Three models emerged from the research of Williams and Wade-Golden (2007). Below, we have summarized their models.

Collaborative Office Model: This model is oldest and the most common. It represented attempts to upgrade the old “Minority Affairs” positions that first emerged in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Categorized as classically “collaborative,” it is generally described as follows:

- Limited staff: usually one staff assistant
- Reports to president or provost but is not a member of the leadership team
- Little or no formal authority
- Does 100% of work in relationship to others
- No direct reporting units

While this model has experienced relative success in responding to crisis situations, it is difficult to sustain over time because of changing players, other emerging institutional or divisional priorities and complacency.

Unit Based Model: This model emerged has an incremental response to the limitations of the collaboration model, depending on “lateral coordination” and is characterized as follows:

- Limited staff sometimes with one or more program assistants
- Reports to Provost or president
- Narrowly defined authority
- Work is largely dependent on relationships with others
- No direct reporting units

Portfolio Divisional Model: Williams and Wade-Golden fondly refer to this as the “Cadillac Model.” It is generally found in large state-funded universities, especially those that were motivated early on to react to a major campus incident or issue.

- Often called the Chief Diversity Officer (CDO), this senior level position reports to the president or other officers and trustees
- The CDO oversees several strategic reporting units, which could include,
 - Cultural centers
 - Retention and pipeline programs
 - Community outreach
 - Ethnic and gender studies
 - Minority or multicultural affairs

Institutions of higher education vary widely in size, type, and scope. Regardless of such variety, the key to successful efforts is a committed leadership team focused on institutional change. These leaders must facilitate and enable all segments of the campus to play a role in such change.

Faculty Diversity

There is plenty of evidence to support that a more diverse faculty affects teaching and learning in higher education. Milem (2001) found that women faculty of color contributed significantly to the university's teaching, research, and service atypical of white faculty members. Further, the study suggested that race and gender play a significant role in classroom teaching methods and contribute further to active learning methods and engagement for students. These methods positively impact the learning outcomes- particularly for students of color at majority serving institutions. Having faculty members of diverse backgrounds contributes to the active pedagogy allows students to intentionally interact with peers from different backgrounds through class discussions, collaborative learning approaches, and group work. Further, when students are exposed to active teaching methods, their experiences on campus are significantly influenced and lead to participation in activities that support diversity, equity, and inclusion (Astin, 1993; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998; Clayton-Pederson, O'Neill, & Musil, 2017).

A diverse faculty also provides students with opportunities to read and research problems that address peoples from historically marginalized backgrounds. This is another interaction that leads to positive academic and social outcomes for students. Through course readings, the engagement of diverse faculty and students provides students of color and white students opportunities to see themselves reflected in the curriculum to have meaningful dialogue about understanding their roles in society. A diverse curriculum develops a deeper understanding of students' experiences who differ from them in various ways.

Faculty of color also extend the university's research mission; they are far more likely than their white counterparts to explore areas of race, women, and gender in society (Milem, 2001). Also, research indicates that faculty of color and women engage in more service-related activities with more significant frequency than their white faculty. The students who attend campuses with more diverse faculty are more likely to be exposed to student-centered faculty, and a teaching curriculum focused on their experiences and reflects contributions of racial and ethnic minorities and women in society. Because diverse faculty provide unique contributions to higher education, academic units must continue recruiting actively and retaining faculty of color as they play a fundamental role in academia.

Student Diversity

What is it?

The prevailing viewpoint reflected in research is that student diversity in a campus context encompasses the idea of participation by a group of people of differing backgrounds and experiences and multiple dimensions regarding lifestyles. The definition shared by Clayton-Pederson, et al. (2017), posited their ideas on the topic as follows: “Individual differences (e.g., personality, learning styles, and life experiences) and group/social differences (e.g., race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, sexual identity, country of origin, and ability as well as cultural, political, religious, or other affiliations) that can be engaged in the service of learning.”

Inclusion is an important factor associated with student diversity in terms of whether policies and practices are in place to ensure the maximum benefits are realized by the student body. Inclusion by the students in all aspects of student campus life should be “active, intentional, and ongoing engagement . . . in people, in the curriculum, in the co-curriculum, and in communities (intellectual, social, cultural, geographical) with which individuals might connect – in ways that increase one’s awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within [and change] systems and institutions,” according to Clayton-Pederson, et al.

Why does it matter?

Diversity and inclusion are important factors in the life experiences and successes in learning by the students. The Greater Expectations National Panel of the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U, 2002) shared some critical points on reasons why diversity and inclusion fulfill significant roles in college. The importance of addressing essential learning outcomes in grade school and continuing at progressively higher levels through college studies should also be addressed. Students should be challenged by gaining Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Natural and Physical World, including studies in core subject disciplines: the arts, social studies, mathematics, sciences, English-language arts and for the following aspects:

- Addressing questions for growth and development in intellectual and practical skills, and global competence.
- Inquiry and analysis, critical, and creative thinking.
- Written and oral communication, quantitative literacy, information literacy, teamwork and problem solving through practicing across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance and individual and social responsibilities, civic knowledge and engagement—local and global.
- Learning from peers who have enjoyed different experiences enriches intercultural knowledge and competence, ethical reasoning, and action.

- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning anchored through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges.
- Integrative learning synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies demonstrated through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems from College Learning for the New Global Century.

Haring-Smith (2012) shared an important reflection on why diversity matters: “For years, American higher education institutions have been working hard to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of our campuses. This work is driven in part by arguments for social justice and the felt need for equal and expanded access to higher education. Our society is diverse, and our campuses should reflect that. We also seek diverse student bodies because we know from numerous research studies that engaging with others from a variety of different backgrounds improves the learning environment. Our learning is impoverished when we are in a homogeneous group of like-minded individuals who share the same kinds of experiences, beliefs, and aspirations.” The Association of American Colleges and Universities also points out, diversity should be talked about as “inclusive excellence, for only when a campus is truly inclusive can it make a claim to excellence.” Haring-Smith (2012) further stated, “We have made significant progress in improving the racial and ethnic diversity in our institutions. Over the past forty years, our freshman classes have changed from over 90 percent white to about 73 percent white.” According to the most recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey (2011), African Americans now comprise 11.5 percent of our freshman classes, and 12.4 percent of first-year students are Latino, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, or Chicano.... This is remarkably close to the national census data from 2010, which report that 72.4 percent of Americans are white, and 12.6 percent are black. There is, however, still a considerable disparity between the prevalence of Hispanics and Latinos on our campuses and in the population as a whole: 16.3 percent of the national population identify as Hispanic, Latino, or Mexican in terms of national origin.

Diversity should be celebrated, as it reflects democracy in action. C. Schneider (2013) declared, “Diversity fully embraced is the ultimate test for a democratic community.... Diversity describes our fellow citizens; democratic values inscribe the obligations we affirm—and enact—with one another.... It is more imperative than ever that we be able to answer the question ‘Making Progress?’ with an emphatic ‘yes’—particularly when that progress relates to students' capacities to engage proactively with their diverse and stratified world.”

Among many other questions that students should consider during the college selection and admissions process, is the notion of what makes a good “fit” in terms of whether the environment will be comfortable and meets their needs for academic challenges and preparation for employment and quality of life. J. Moody (2020) reminded us, “Prospective college students should honestly evaluate all facets of their identity in the admissions process.... Diversity often means race, ethnicity or tribal affiliation, but also extends well beyond those factors to sexual identity and orientation, income level, first-generation status, cultural background and gender... Depending on what a college needs or wants in a class, that term can extend even further.”

EVERFI (2021) posited general comments on the benefits of diversity in higher education. “The benefits of diversity in education, especially higher education, stretch far and wide — affecting students’ academic and social experiences, as well as having a direct impact on their future. The positive effects of diversity enable students to work with people from other races, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds and challenges the views they are accustomed to. This leads to greater awareness, understanding, and acceptance of differing beliefs and customs.”

EVERFI also reported that according to an article from the Center for American Progress, “More than half of all U.S. babies today are people of color, and by 2050 our nation will have no clear racial or ethnic majority. Our nation is changing, and our higher education institutions need to reflect this diversity.”

In addition, EVERFI described the following five benefits of diversity in higher education.

1. Campus cultural diversity enriches the educational experience.
2. Diversity on campus improves communication and thought processing skills.
3. Campus diversity challenges stereotypes. Students are often raised around people of similar socioeconomic, racial, or cultural characteristics. For many students, regardless of whether they identify as part of a minority or culturally diverse population, the college will challenge predisposed stereotypes or norms that may have been developed during adolescence. When presented with opportunities to critically explore these experiences, students can become more accepting, tolerant, and thoughtful members of society.
4. Students can see themselves in their leaders. For many students who attend institutions that seriously address diversity, it’s a chance to see models from similar backgrounds whom they can emulate.
5. Diversity better prepares students for the workforce. According to the American Council on Education (2012) “Education within a diverse setting prepares students to become good citizens in an increasingly complex, pluralistic society; it fosters mutual respect and teamwork, and it helps build communities whose members are judged by the quality of their character and their contributions.”

Ultimately, studies show that diversity in education, particularly on college campuses, improve the “intellectual engagement, self-motivation, citizenship, and cultural engagement, and academic skills like critical thinking, problem-solving, and writing – for students of all races. Interacting with diverse peers outside a classroom setting directly benefits students, making them better scholars, thinkers, and citizens.”

University Best Practices for Student Success

The following is a compilation of ideas, programs, and practices that highlights some of the proven strategies for success in universities across the nation, including both Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU's) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) universities.

- Provide financial support and ensure that resources are available and make extraordinary efforts to promote the information among diverse populations of students.
- Offer child-care options to support students with families.
- Become intentional in sharing materials in a marketing campaign to share pride in the diversity of the campus.
- Establish and monitor goals and objectives and a diversity plan that specifically targets diversity and provide status dashboard/data reports on progress and that includes required training for faculty and staff and students.
- Review and revise school policies and practices manuals and ensure each document and plan is non-discriminatory and welcoming for a diverse student body.
- Ensure the school website and social media reports reflect what the school stands for in terms of promotion of diversity and pride in the current student body, faculty, and school graduates. Be careful to avoid posting accounts and images that do not reflect difference.
- Publish documents that reflect diversity, respect, and inclusion on campus and in the community.
- Hold meetings periodically with diverse campus populations to listen to students' points of view on campus life and make appropriate adjustments as may better reflect what the school stands for on diversity and school environment.
- Conduct faculty training programs to emphasize the importance of student diversity and ensuring a welcoming environment for students and faculty.
- Maintain a recruitment program, budgeted adequately, for aggressive recruitment of a diverse group of students, including funds for grants and scholarships.
- Ensure that an exit strategy is in place to be completed by non-graduate and graduate students for exit interviews of students.
- Conduct community town hall meetings to assess the mood of the community on diversity and to ensure alignment among the college and community on treatment of students and positive interactions on and off campus.

- Maintain mentoring and academic tutoring and counseling support for students within and across differing diverse student populations.
- Implement programs designed to facilitate and enhance students' transition to college and throughout student tenure in school up to and including graduation, with special emphasis on start-up with high school students prior to entering school.
- Employ a chief diversity and inclusion officer with staff and an adequate budget to achieve the mission of the college and connect the office with the Office of the President or Chancellor level of the school.
- Establish student podcasts for diverse student populations and include students in planning, programming, and participating the programs.
- Create professional and personal development initiatives for African American, Latinx and Asian men and women, Indigenous, and LGBTQ student groups.

Areas of Concern and Challenge

The progress continues in the diversification of student bodies colleges and universities across the nation, including establishment of offices and departments where direct responsibility is assigned for planning and implementation of programs and policies and devotion of resources to support diversity and inclusion and academic, emotional, and social well-being. Such progress is limited to some but not all schools and not without concerns and challenges. Two of the areas of concern are noted as follows: 1) heightened level of politics with the push by some to “turn the clock backwards” on affirmative action policies against the pull of others in attempts to move forward for improvements in this arena; and 2) the practices in place that limit aggressive enrollment and academic success of people of color and women in certain schools and disciplines such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). This is the case despite the evidence of success among scores of minority students and women demonstrating success in school and careers in STEM fields.

The Supreme Court has issued rulings on affirmative action for nearly half a century, resulting in limitations being placed on universities that may wish to consider race as part of the admissions and selection procedure. A growing number of states have demonstrated reluctance to implement affirmative action programs and have gone so far as passing legislation to prevent implementation of affirmative action program in schools. In the *Adams vs. Richardson* case of 1970, for example, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund filed a suit on behalf of black college students from across the country, complaining that ten states were operating segregated systems of higher education in violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Notably, Millhiser pointed out that in the “first affirmative action in university admissions case to reach the Supreme Court, ...explain (ed) that race does play a role in deciding whom to admit from a third group of

candidates” in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978). Third group, continues Millhiser, refers to “the large group of applicants who are ‘admissible’ and deemed capable of doing good work in their courses . . . but aren’t so exceptional as to be virtually guaranteed admission.” More recently, in the *Grutter v Bollinger* (2003) and *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* (2016) cases, in general, “the court has ruled that “universities may not use quotas that set aside a certain number of seats for applicants of color, and they may not use formulas that grant a mathematical advantage to every applicant from a certain racial background.” Yet, in *Grutter v Bollinger* (2003) Millhiser said the court explained that “numerous studies show that student body diversity promotes student outcomes, and better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce and society, and better prepares them as professionals.”

The challenges continue with cases filed against affirmative action, the most recent of which to reach the Supreme Court being the *Students for Fair Admissions v President & Fellows of Harvard College* in which Asian American applicants are challenging the rejection rate among Asian Americans being so high. Millhiser wrote, “The *Harvard* case is the first major affirmative action suit to reach the Supreme Court since Republicans gained a 6-3 majority on that Court.... The case presents fundamental questions about what it means to live in a pluralistic society, and what role elite institutions should play in fostering such a society”. We need to keep a closer eye on the Courts and State legislators going forward as they continue to roll back the clock with repressive decisions and policies.

Glasener, et.al., (2019) shared their viewpoints on these challenges in formulating better understanding of the circumstances associated with race and post-affirmative action. “As several high-profile court cases reignite the debate over affirmative action, university administrators are being challenged to consider alternatives to race-conscious policy”.... The calls persist “for broader, more ‘inclusive’ definitions of diversity than those emphasizing race alone. As one administrator explained, the term diversity was so commonplace at UGA that it held no specificity but was instead ‘in the eye of the beholder.’ Administrators adopting this frame described diversity in such universal ways that the term became meaningless, color-blind, and even absurd (e.g., serving ‘purple’ students).

On the other hand, the ‘educational benefits’ and ‘excellence’ frames led administrators to focus less on contentious racial inequalities on campuses and more on the benefits of diversity for all students. Meanwhile, some administrators believed the term diversity was outdated and needed to be replaced with a "social justice" perspective emphasizing oppression rather than mere difference. However, official university documents avoided this frame entirely, favoring terms like ‘celebration’ and "courage" instead. Consistent with prior research, this finding suggests that when diversity is left open for interpretation, it can become detached from histories of struggle for equality.

Glasener and colleagues conclude that official documents and administrators at UGA espoused multiple, co-existing, and sometimes contradictory diversity frames and suggest that these fragmented and amorphous frames may be a serious liability for institutional leaders. Specifically,

divergent diversity frames may be detrimental to the work of advancing racial equity at the institution.

These findings suggest that universities should be clear about how diversity is associated with, but distinct from, ideals like equity, so college administrators can proceed with a common language and shared expectations. As diversity frames change, it appears to be especially important to be explicit about how race relates to current efforts” (Glasener, et al., 2019).

It is incumbent on all concerned about this issue to be vigilant and actively engaged to vote in elections and participate in the discourse, not to leave to chance the movement forward for better and improvement in the diversification of our schools.

With respect to the consideration of how best to frame and address the lack of diversity in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) fields, the federal government has emphasized that enrolling more Black and other minority students in STEM fields is important for national security and the economic well-being of our society. But a study by Lorenzo DuBois Baber (2015), an assistant professor of education policy, organization and leadership at the University of Illinois, finds that efforts to increase the number of Black and other minority students in STEM fields will not reach their full potential until educators and national policymakers focus on ensuring equal opportunity rather than economic necessity.

Dr. Baber says, “In the 1950s when Sputnik happened, and the federal government made the decision to invest more in research and utilizing universities, our higher education structure was very segregated. Students of color were not able to participate in the development of STEM fields. The economic rationale is important, and obviously brings more people to the table, but we also need to recognize that increasing diversity in STEM is a social justice issue. We need to think about remedying past discrimination in STEM fields along with the economic rationale.”

Diversity Matters

Suppose institutional leaders genuinely wish to utilize diversity to successfully transform their institutions to make them more democratic and equitable and enhance teaching and learning for all students. In that case, they must pay close attention to their campus climate and increase diversity. Until recently, the importance of the institutional context(s) in creating environments where we can fully realize the benefits of diversity. "Often neglected in the debate about diversity in the fact that achieving a racially diverse student body by itself is not sufficient to bring about desired outcomes and how it is managed matters greatly" (Lui, 1998, p. 439).

Decades of research published by Hurtado (1998, 1999) indicate that most institutions typically focus on only one element of the climate: increasing racial/ethnic students on campus. While this is essential, it should not be the only goal. There are many other critical elements of the campus climate that garner attention.

When colleges and university leaders engage in diversity as a part of their institutional mission, they find that diversity helps transform their campuses in fundamental and positive ways. This transformation changes how faculty teach courses and who teaches them. Paying attention to this institutional context that promotes diversity is paramount if institutional leaders desire to successfully use campus diversity to enhance their institutions' teaching and learning missions.

There are many benefits to increasing diversity on a college campus, such as (1) to the economy and corporate sector, (2) building essential skills for the workforce (3) organizational culture and performance.

Benefits of Diversity to the Economic and Private Sector - Diversity in the workplace is good for business because it increases businesses' flexibility and economic viability in ways that enable diverse businesses to maximize their earning potential.

Benefits to the Essential Skills for Workers in Global Economy - For businesses to thrive, along with social skills, personal skills, and prior work experience, many corporate leaders indicate that one of the key skills a person can have is strong cultural competence which is a widened knowledge and adaptability to different cultural perspectives. Attending a university specializing in preparing all of its students for more robust intercultural competence will increase the skill sets of its graduates for the global economy.

Benefits to the Organizational Culture - Organizations with diverse employees tend to be better problem solvers and less likely to rely on group thinking (Cox, 1993). The group's heterogeneity allows a higher level of critical analysis to solve problems and think differently about an issue.

Students of color benefit in our society in a variety of ways. They participate in service and civic activities as well as in underserved communities. Further, majority students who engage with other students and faculty who are not like them report higher levels of interactions with diverse populations when they graduate, and are more likely to continue living and working within diverse communities and businesses (Cox, 1993). Because college is the first, and sometimes only, opportunity for various groups to come together in a formalized setting, it is imperative that higher education institutions work to increase and strengthen diversity while students are enrolled on their campuses.

What is Social Justice

Social justice education and practice within higher education is vital for preparing the next generation of leaders. These leaders in all industries can prevent the recurrence of circumstances that led to tragic consequences for Americans of color. If systems and beliefs can change for African Americans in particular, circumstances and opportunities will be better for all non-whites. For generations, African Americans have consistently fought for the key principles of social justice: Access to Resources, Equity, Participation, Diversity, and Human Rights. Research has

proven that the uncompensated labor by enslaved Africans and their descendants served as the foundation of capitalism in America (Hannah-Jones, 2019). The institution of slavery also established systemic structures-legal, sociocultural, and economic-that negatively impacted African Americans. An important step forward in preparing tomorrow's leaders is to incorporate the study of historical social justice challenges like the legacy of lynching and race massacres and their impact on current social justice challenges, like economic disenfranchisement, voter suppression, mass incarceration, unequal education, and other disparate treatment of historically marginalized people.

The concept of social justice first emerged in the 19th century, to explore the social structure of this period of great disparities in wealth and social standing between upper class whites, and recently freed Black people. As a political and philosophical theory, social justice "focuses on the concept of fairness in relations between individuals in society and equal access to wealth, opportunities, and social privileges" (CFI, 2021).

Social justice education and practice is part of a complex narrative. Inclusion of social justice curriculum seeks to promote positive cultural change not only for the immediate stakeholders (students and faculty) but for the entire campus and surrounding community (Gordon et al., 2017). According to McPhail, "the first step in doing something about social injustice is to acknowledge that social injustice exists" (McPhail, 2021). Social justice issues can be discussed and examined within the academic context. Ranging from course level projects to full programs of study, students can engage in critical dialogue, raise awareness of privilege and further explore the sociocultural dynamics that give rise to social injustice (Patton et al., 2010). There are also firsthand accounts recorded and written from those in impacted communities and their descendants on either side of conflicts (Franklin, 2001).

Social Justice in Higher Education

The pursuit of social justice in higher education is neither new nor incongruous. This country's first institutes of higher learning sought to provide a means of advancement for the very privileged, but soon evolved to instruments of advancement for some outside the elite strata. However, except for a very few, these historically white universities (PWI's) for more than 200 years excluded African Americans. As a result, all of our nation's historically black colleges and universities (HBCU's) were founded as social justice institutions – that is to provide a higher education for those who were denied access elsewhere. HBCU's continued to roll out social justice as the norm and the PWIs have since followed suit (some willingly, others out of sheer necessity). This evolution of social justice has given birth to the contemporary conversations mentioned earlier of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Today's colleges and universities may not all agree on the terminology but at their core they are providing countless mechanisms of social justice through their curricular offerings, through their service-oriented programming, and most importantly, through their collective graduates.

“(S)ocial justice in education refers to a commitment to challenging social, cultural, and economic inequalities imposed on individuals arising from any differential distribution of power, resources, and privilege.” (Mills School of Education, 2021) We see so much of these inequalities in our current day. The unfortunate nature of these inequalities can not only move the finish line, but they can also erase the starting line as well. That they continue to exist is a result of the systemic nature of racism and oppression in our society. To ameliorate these conditions will take a universal commitment to want to do so. And then it will take the same universality to do the work necessary to bring about the changes needed. Our colleges and universities are ideally positioned to create the change agents required to do this work.

“(E)xperience with building community across difference and intersectionality is invaluable in today’s leadership. In fact, to successfully lead in the 21st century via a social justice approach, all higher education leaders may require such experience.” (Nair & Thomas 2018). These higher education leaders will have to lead by example and the students will follow. But they must be informed and they must learn the strategies involved.

More Than A #Hashtag: Student Understanding

Today’s college students must understand that social justice is much more than merely creating a #hashtag. The work of social justice is just that, work. In addition to doing the necessary research on the issue at hand, doing social justice right takes time, energy, understanding, and commitment. Attending a protest, carrying a sign, or sharing a post can easily slip into performative activism. That is, actions merely performed so others can “see” that individual is “down for the cause” when in reality it is all done just for show or in modern parlance, for “likes” and “follows”. True social justice requires ongoing engagement and often a bit of sacrifice. Standing up for others and standing up for what is right are seldom the popular choices nor are they often found on the path of least resistance.

In fact, along the social justice journey are a number of speed bumps and road blocks. Speed bumps like “the imposter syndrome” can have one feeling as if they have not earned their respective space and may in some way be less than genuinely qualified. This “syndrome” plagues many a dedicated and worthy individual and leads them to think that they do not truly belong. However, at the root of the imposter syndrome is a more direct effect of systemic racism and oppression. People should not blame themselves nor limit their abilities to help themselves and others. Road blocks to social justice can include laws on the books, centuries old traditions, and other entrenched obstacles. They can, and must all be overcome.

“Let us recommit to working together to address current and future issues using foundational principles of communities of practice, such as accountability, civic engagement, cultural humility, and integrity.” (Nair & Thomas 2018). By doing this, we can effectively sustain a social justice movement. By engaging our college and university students, we can create the long-lasting, far reaching change necessary. Recently we commemorated the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa massacre. In one swell swoop, an entire Black enclave of commerce, prosperity, self-reliance,

and community was obliterated. Multi-generational wealth was destroyed and the residual effect was the creation of a huge social justice concern. This atrocity and others like it had been buried and ignored for decades. Fairly recent attention has been paid to this particular event but Tulsa is not an isolated story when it comes to massacres of African Americans. Rosewood, Chicago, Vicksburg, and more recently Charleston begin a list that includes dozens of locations. Additionally, a list of locales where significant Black Business centers were destroyed via “urban renewal” and federal interstate “cut-throughs” would include Syracuse, Durham, New Orleans, and more. (Horwitt, 2021) The social justice journey is never ending.

What Can Students Do

For those who are looking for ways to begin this type of work, the first suggestion is to do your research. Find out as much as you can on the issue you want to pursue. See what else is being done on your topic and who is involved. Challenge yourself to find a way to engage. In June of 2020, The VolunteerMatch Blog shared “15 simple ways to get you started’ on social change. Here are just a few of their suggestions:

- “Share your support for social justice and civil rights causes and re-share what others are saying on social media;
- Educate yourself and share what you’ve learned;
- Amplify and promote underrepresented voices;
- Create space for dialogue and exchange of information and ideas;
- Mentor or tutor a child in need;
- Help to shrink the inequality gap by giving your time to combat food insecurity and homeless(ness). “

There are ample examples throughout our recent history of young people doing the right thing. But this is nothing new. While Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s quotes have often been appropriated and sometimes even used to slow the progress of social justice, he and many of his contemporaries frequently espoused about the need for social reform. They also recognized the importance of young people getting involved as it was noted that nearly all meaningful social change had been sparked by the youth. At Oberlin College’s 1965 commencement he “implor(ed) the graduates to remain diligent and active in the fight for equality. Human progress, he said, ‘comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals,’ and they ‘realize that the time is always right to do right.’” (Anderson, 2021). So, in other words, with apologies to MLK and a gentle nod, to legendary filmmaker, Spike Lee, “it’s always the right time to do the right thing.”

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