

Diversity and Inclusion vs. Equity and Social Justice

... As I shared in my remarks at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, diversity and inclusion rhetoric asks fundamentally different questions and is concerned with fundamentally different issues than efforts seeking equity and justice.

Diversity asks, “Who’s in the room?” Equity responds: “Who is trying to get in the room but can’t? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?”

Inclusion asks, “Has everyone’s ideas been heard?” Justice responds, “Whose ideas won’t be taken as seriously because they aren’t in the majority?”

Diversity asks, “How many more of [pick any minoritized identity] group do we have this year than last?” Equity responds, “What conditions have we created that maintain certain groups as the perpetual majority here?”

Inclusion asks, “Is this environment safe for everyone to feel like they belong?” Justice challenges, “Whose safety is being sacrificed and minimized to allow others to be comfortable maintaining dehumanizing views?”

Diversity asks, “Isn’t it separatist to provide funding for safe spaces and separate student centers?” Equity answers, “What are people experiencing on campus that they don’t feel safe when isolated and separated from others like themselves?”

Inclusion asks, “Wouldn’t it be a great program to have a panel debate Black Lives Matter? We had a Black Lives Matter activist here last semester, so this semester we should invite someone from the alt-right.” Justice answers, “Why would we allow the humanity and dignity of people or our students to be the subject of debate or the target of harassment and hate speech?”

Diversity celebrates increases in numbers that still reflect minoritized status on campus and incremental growth. Equity celebrates reductions in harm, revisions to abusive systems and increases in supports for people’s life chances as reported by those who have been targeted.

Inclusion celebrates awards for initiatives and credits itself for having a diverse candidate pool. Justice celebrates getting rid of practices and policies that were having disparate impacts on minoritized groups.

By substituting diversity and inclusion rhetoric for transformative efforts to promote equity and justice, HWIs have appeased their constituents and avoided recognizable institutional change. But it is time for historically white institutions in American higher education to pursue real change and abandon the politics of appeasement.

A truly democratic education must not be ideologically neutral; rather, it must ardently pursue the preparation of students for engaged citizenship in an ostensibly democratic society. Whether HWI leaders will gather the institutional will and the moral and ethical courage to provoke and institute real, substantive institutional transformation is unknown. The first step on that road, however, is to make equity and justice the yardstick by which leaders measure progress instead of merely diversity and inclusion.

(Excerpt from Inside Higher Ed, March 30, 2017, “Language of Appeasement” by Dafina-Lazarus Stewart)