

From Where I Sit: Equality, Equity, and Justice

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We seem to be in a constant state of crisis. From COVID-19 to the come and go of an egregious immigration ban, from the ever-growing political divisiveness to natural disasters, we just can't catch a break in 2020. Within this unstable and unpredictable context, many are also experiencing a reawakening of the racial injustices and perils experienced by our Black communities today. The veil of White immunity¹ has lifted and we're recognizing that despite the gains made for equity and justice since the Civil Rights movement, so much of the outcomes and dynamics have remained the same. Policies, programs, initiatives, and the best of intentions have failed to make radical changes for the lives and experiences of our most marginalized communities. As scientists and academics, we tend to respond immediately to acts of crisis with a brainstorm of solutions and reactionary initiatives. Our office has received a slew of requests for workshops and trainings, reviews of material, and just overall consultation on how *not* to be part of the problems and to instead, be proactive in enacting initiatives that improve diversity and promote inclusion within their labs, majors, and departments.

Because we are currently faced with an unprecedented opening in history where organizations, specifically, higher education institutions have been given an opportunity to reexamine the seemingly foundational tenets of how we offer higher education and the global purposes of higher education. Higher education institutions are microcosms of the American society, and thus, are situated and complicit in the history of anti-blackness, that has manifested in all of our policies, processes/procedures, and even in the replication of the racial inequities found in our student populations. Specifically, the watershed moment of George Floyd for the Black Lives Matter movement, mandatory quarantine and physical distancing as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the constant state of anxiety we seem to live in has created a perfect opportunity for us to assess, question, and critically examine how "we've always done things."

As a "professional" in the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), I have very mixed feelings about all of the good faith efforts. Yes, I am excited that there is a new onslaught of folks who want to be more inclusive and value diversity. I love the momentum of change, the excitement and synergy these watershed moments have created across our campuses. Yet, I worry. I worry that the changes promised are episodic, not funded, and not sustainable. I worry that in our quest to be responsive, we have not stopped to dig deeper on how we got here in the first place and be thoughtful in a proposed strategy to move forward. I worry that as scientists we attempt to be objective on matters that

are rooted in the core of what makes us humans- our feelings, morality, and subjective interpretations of the world around us. In our desperation to respond and "fix" problems, engineer solutions with timetables, we devalue the need to take a moment to reflect and feel deeply what is happening around us. And yet, in our reactionary state, we are missing the central tenet to DEI, which is to question who is invited to the proverbial table of decision-making (diversity), whose voice matters (inclusion), and who is given the power and agency to enact change (representation).

Let's take a step back. The lexicon of DEI work is as important as the way we see it applied to our programs and responses. As college presidents symbolically address their campuses and all of their internal and external constituents, they have a common thread of confirming that Black Lives Matter on their campus and beyond and ending with a commitment to diversity and inclusion. These initiatives, programs, and promises can be categorized in three distinct categories: equality, equity, and justice. **Equality** has traditionally been the easiest, and defensibly, the backbone of our meritocratic narrative of how we see ourselves in science. We have rested on the laurels of equality to imply that we, as individuals and institutions, are fair and just in how we create, produce, and innovate within our scientific fields. *Anyone can apply to our programs and institutions. I treat everyone the same in my lab. I objectively discern my student's research by their results and other empirical outcomes.* I challenge that the definition of equality is not fairness, but rather, synonymous to sameness. Equality means that we provide the SAME set of conditions, resources, and experiences to all of our students, staff, and faculty. Equality can negate the reality that we all start at very different places in life. *Studies show that students from diverse backgrounds and identities that are traditionally underrepresented in STEM will not apply to our institutions.*² *The way you are treating your students ignores the fact that they are fundamentally different in their needs, skills, abilities, life situations; no two are the same. Students' access to resources and research opportunities are predicated on many subjective factors. Empirical research shows that students of color are not given the same opportunities to succeed in STEM.*³ Sameness may be appropriate when we are fundamentally starting from a state of sameness- our identities, life experiences, opportunities, cultural contexts, capital, etc.

¹ Cabrera, Nolan L. (2018). White Immunity: Working Through Some of the Pedagogical Pitfalls of "Privilege," *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity* (JCSOCRE), 3(1)

² Jensen, L.E. & Deemer, E.D. (2019). Identity, Campus Climate, and Burnout Among Undergraduate Women in STEM Fields. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 67(2).

³ Estrada, M. Burnett, M., et. al. (2017). Improving Underrepresented Minority Student Persistence in STEM. *Life Sciences Education* 15(3).

If equality is not adequate in creating “fairness,” then what approach considers the empirical fact that we are diverse and unequal from the start? **Equity** is the term to describe the idea of fairness. Recognizing that people are different and structurally have not been afforded equal footing in the resources, opportunities, and experiences they’ve had in their lifetime, we can level the playing field by enacting initiatives that are equity-based. Fixing the past grievances and wrongs and acknowledging that we are different from the start is imperative in understanding the values and the importance of equity-based programs and solutions. Higher education institutions will have identity-centric programs to create equitable environments. These include summer bridge programs, cohort-building programs, mentorship programs, diversity fellowships and awards, and other initiatives that are designed to promote equitable opportunities for those who have historically been excluded, marginalized and underserved. Equity is not for the faint of heart. Although the masses may understand the logic for equity-based programs and initiatives, the backlash from those who traditionally hold the value of sameness will adopt languages like “reverse discrimination” and challenge why individuals should bear the consequences of historic, systemic and structural inequalities.

When we take a deeper cut and start identifying patterns in the differences of starting places, we will uncover the roots of inequality that are structural and historical within our systems, policies, culture, and standard operating procedures. Critically examining the underpinnings of why and how we do education, work, and science, we find problematic, systemic issues that are at the root cause of the inequality we’re seeing now. Responding to this requires us to take a **justice**-based approach in removing structural barriers that keep a diverse group of people from achieving and/or experiencing resources, opportunities and life chances. Our educational systems were historically designed to benefit a very specific White, male constituent body. The rules, processes, and policies were tailored to further advance their place in society and thus, we’ve had to reexamine, protest, and amend.

A **justice**-based approach is contentious because it requires individuals to wrestle with the privileges and benefits they’ve been afforded as we begin to ad-

dress the wrongs of a collective. In other words, those who have been successful in achieving success in the current systems are being asked to question the merits of their entry and make room for those who will be playing a different game. The rules are shifting, and the purposes of higher education have become more inclusive. Some traditionally, privileged individuals who are sitting at the table will resort to seeing the current tide as a zero-sum game, one in which they may be displaced by someone who was structurally left out of the room altogether. At this point, will that privileged individual recognize their displacement as a sign of progress and justice? The perception of losing power, the feelings of entitlement to keep things the way they’ve always been, and other attitudes that stem from colonial imperialism must be realized and addressed before we can truly make progress with a justice framework. I hope that we can remain steadfast to a global perspective and commitment to right the wrongs of injustice, unroot the tenacious and pervasive culture of anti-blackness, and be willing to dismantle these myths of objectivity and meritocracy.

“Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic... Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble.”

—*John Lewis, June 2018*

Now is the time to make good trouble, using the same scientific method we’ve held on to for centuries. Being strategic means to employ the same research lens to the problems we see around us. What do the literature, theories, and data suggest for organizational change to promote diversity, mandate inclusion, and pursue justice? We have to be willing to experiment, collect data, and learn from our mistakes along the way. We should also be transparent with our data and examine our results with a critical eye for growth and improvisation.

Perhaps we could not have predicted the extent of 2020 tragedies, but we have the responsibility and opportunity to strategically respond in moving forward, advancing humanity to create a more just world. Our science will be better for it because we will finally be acknowledging that we are fallible, yet ever-evolving humans who do science. ■