

# Centering Anti-Racism, Equity, and Inclusion: An Imperative for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Excellence

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## Abstract

With the rise in anti-racism movements, increasing visibility of inequities in society and changing demographics of the country, many institutions have responded with public statements, hiring of DEI leaders, and the establishment of new anti-racism task forces. The question is whether this moment will be a true inflection point to address the unfinished business of the past, or a repeat of patterns we have seen. This commentary urges institutions to make sure to see this work as an imperative for institutional excellence that requires increasing *institutional* capacity for diversity and understanding how anti-racism, equity, and inclusion are tied to strategic excellence in every domain of our institutions.

**Keywords:** institutional capacity building, diversity, anti-racism, equity

## Introduction

Like many institutions across the country, and especially because of the mission of CUMU institutions, centering on anti-racism, equity, and inclusion are a central issue of strategic plans. The police killings, including George Floyd's death that spawned worldwide protests about racial injustice, gave increased urgency to the Black Lives Matter movement and momentum to anti-racism efforts throughout higher education. On top of that, the pandemic exposed and laid bare inequities across health care and education. The white supremacist assault on the capital highlighted, once again, the critical need for justice and racial reckoning. Anti-Asian events and increasing violence against the trans community demonstrate the urgency of supporting many communities under siege and educating all leaders for what it takes to make a pluralistic society that works and for addressing structural inequities. Every institution in the country, and perhaps especially metropolitan institutions, must confront the fragility of democracy, the imperative of fundamental institutional change, and the seriousness of what is at stake.

## Reframing the paradigm

Reframing our ways of thinking about this work from an institutional perspective provides opportunities to confront the unfinished business of the past even as we address the issues of today. Perhaps at this moment, we can make the profound systemic changes needed so that we do not find ourselves returning back to these issues or similar topics as we have for the past 60 years. What have we learned from the many moments in the last decades when we had opportunities to make progress?

While I am encouraged by the strong anti-racism statements and hiring of chief diversity officers in higher education and almost every industry in the country, I am concerned. They could represent real requirements for change or the beginning of similar patterns we have seen over the past decades, such as a committee, a report, a review, and a discussion. Many of these replicate reports, committees, and discussions of the past often established after a different crisis. Given the changing demographics of our society and the apparent inequities and the implications for a healthy democracy that works, change must be, and can now be understood, as an institutional imperative. However, what does a real imperative look like?

Decades ago, our institutions intentionally developed capacity for technology. Technology was understood to be an imperative because of societal changes. Not everyone agreed; some worried that core academic experiences like books and libraries would disappear, but institutions began to invest in the infrastructure, and disciplines began to change. It was an imperative. Building the human capacity of staff, faculty, and students was also essential. Changes concerning technology represented an imperative in higher education in every aspect of our institutions. Significantly, we now can see a practical demonstration of what an imperative looks like when we immediately went to online learning at the beginning of the pandemic. Had we not built the capacity over decades, that would not have been possible.

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The challenge, of course, is that the necessity for building capacity for technology across our institutions was visible to most everyone in a way that the consequences of embedded structural inequities have been largely visible only to those who experienced them. Given the last few years, have these inequities, has structural racism now been made visible? Given that the role of American higher education is central to preparing leaders for a pluralistic society, academic excellence requires that our colleges and universities understand how diversity, like technology, is now tied to excellence, making it crucial that institutions increase capacity for diversity. Creating healthy pluralistic democracies requires, at a minimum, an intentional focus on the role and complexity of identities, making sure anti-racism work is not lost in the complexity of work on equity and inclusion, and, most certainly, the recognition of historically embedded societal inequities.

Leaders from all industries are now having to address disparities in their institutions, but too often, their response to revelations of bias and inequality is “I didn’t know.” Why did our leaders who are the graduates of our institutions not know? The content of scholarship and curriculum must prepare our leaders to identify and understand the conditions that create equitable environments for all. These days, diversity, equity, and inclusion are often considered part of an institution’s strategic plan for inclusiveness and a core value parallel with other strategic issues. That is essential but not sufficient.

### Implications for institutions

Anti-racism, equity, and inclusion must be manifested as an imperative for change embedded in structures, systems, knowledge, and metrics for excellence. We must make sure that our graduates in every field and at every level understand what this means and how to interrupt these patterns. This is as true for access, success, and campus climate, as it is for the content of scholarship, the curriculum, and the skills required to help future leaders and scholars confront and engage those inequities so deeply embedded that they restrict the knowledge, development, and, importantly, identification of talent. What, then, have we learned from research as core to this practice?

1. Embed in institutional mission as an immediate and core imperative. Whatever an institution’s mission—leadership preparation, solving complex problems, doing research, engaging communities, providing capacity building—requires understanding the diversity of the human condition, including social, historical, and individual factors that are important. There is no field from business and health care to architecture and urban planning to education where everyone needs deep capacity in structural and individual factors that are relevant. Any area that works with the public or the community, as CUMU institutions do, must be intentional about which publics or which parts of the community are served, addressed, or included in the research.
2. Understand that the institutional work must be both inclusive and differentiated. It is essential to understand that anti-racism work does not conflict with the efforts to disrupt other structural inequities. Indeed, addressing each will ultimately make the institution more inclusive for all. The challenge has been, in the past, that addressing other identity issues has sometimes been

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easier than the serious unfinished business of race in the United States. That avoidance cannot continue.

3. Understand the complexity of identities and their intersectionality, and critically understanding that the embedded inequities that must be addressed are institutional and academic.
4. Data is key. While no institution would ignore budget data to see how they are doing financially, it is amazing how many institutions do not have data readily available on their progress on diversity. There are key metrics that are simple to monitor that hold institutions and leaders accountable for change (Smith, 2020). The research suggests that the traditional response to issues is to create programs that support specific populations. And while these programs are critical to helping individuals and groups succeed, they most often do not address underlying institutional inequities despite their intentions. What is the status of diversity in terms of core metrics, and where is progress needed in student demographics, student success across all fields, faculty hiring and retention, diversity in leadership, research, and curriculum transformation?
5. Capacity must be built throughout the institution intentionally in every department, at every level, both in terms of the qualities required of anyone being hired and the professional development needed as new issues emerge. We have had to do this on an ongoing basis with technology and have invested the resources necessary. The same cannot be said for DEI work, which is often the responsibility of a few people.

## Conclusion

Due to the confluence of recent events, we are in a moment that provides opportunities for real change, opportunities to create organizations where creativity and innovation thrive. It has never been more imperative that we interrupt the usual by recognizing the inextricable indivisibility of diversity and excellence. We will equip American higher education with the tools essential to fulfilling its critical imperative for a healthy democracy that works. Just as technology has been an imperative that requires interrupting the usual, building higher education's capacity for diversity, anti-racism, equity, and inclusion is imperative for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and democracy.

## Reference

Smith, D.G. (2020). *Diversity's promise for higher education: Making it work (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.)*. Johns Hopkins University Press.