Anti-Racism, Equity, and Inclusion at Urban Institutions: An Introduction to the Special Topic Issue

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Introduction

In the wake of 2020's double pandemic (i.e., the ongoing, egregious racial injustice in law enforcement, increased awareness of disparate treatment within the judicial system, and related escalations in civil unrest, against the backdrop of an ongoing global health crisis that is disproportionately impacting people of color), many universities have been forced to grapple with the changing landscape of higher education. The United States continues to be fundamentally characterized by economic, educational, and social disparities grounded in the legacies of slavery, legal segregation, varying degrees of discrimination, and institutional racism. American higher education has been formed and shaped within this historical and cultural context and is not exempt from the practices and structures undergirding social systems which support and replicate racial injustice. Institutions across the country have a long distance to travel in creating environments where the lived experiences of faculty, staff, and students from underrepresented populations on college and university campuses are free of the everyday microaggressions and slights, as well as the structural barriers that impede advancement, progress, and the ability to thrive within the American academy. Despite pandemic-related

declines in enrollment, the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) reports an undergraduate enrollment of 15.9 million students, down from 17.5 million in 2009. Notable in examining the enrollment of students across time is the increasing presence of students from underrepresented and minoritized communities, most notably increases in the enrollment of Latinx/Latine students, individuals of two or more 'races,' and individuals characterized as 'nonresident aliens' (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022a; U. S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

As might be expected, these higher education enrollment numbers, coupled with increasing diversity and polarization across the country, have colleges and universities struggling to implement programs and initiatives that effectively address the cultural competencies of campus stakeholders. We each bring our broader cultural socialization regarding racial differences to the gates of academia. As we review data from the past two decades, we note elevations in hate crimes reported on college campuses, perhaps reflecting campuses as a microcosm of the larger polarized society (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022b; U.S. Department of Education, 2022; Wang et al., 2020).

As urban-serving universities continue to blur the lines between "town and gown," many more students from traditionally underrepresented groups are arriving on campus from the surrounding communities, seeking education and commanding equitable access to opportunity. Institutions of higher education must consider the needs and expectations of their well-informed, socially conscious, and equity-demanding students. Universities facing declining student enrollment across the country must educate or minimally maintain the enrollment of a broader range of students effectively to remain competitive at best or at least to survive fiscally, requiring a paradigm shift in our educational institutions. Instead of demanding that students conform to a narrowly defined notion of an "ideal" or "traditional" student, colleges and universities are called to reimagine education and craft the educational environment with the diverse needs of all students in mind. This necessitates that universities reimagine and rebuild higher education from the ground up, inviting voices not historically included in the institution's design to have a say in how higher education is structured and functions. To achieve this vision, urban universities have the beneficial opportunities to strengthen collaborative relationships with key stakeholders and community organizations who can speak to the priorities and needs of the communities they serve. Unfortunately, university administrators, faculty, and researchers who wish to develop these community partnerships often face challenges in gaining acceptance in these communities. Certainly, the complex history of abuse (e.g., Tuskegee experiment, Henrietta Lacks, etc.) between academic research institutions and marginalized communities, particularly communities of color, makes it difficult for many of these communities to trust academia (Ellis & Abdi, 2017). An equally challenging barrier to developing these collaborative partnerships is the frequently unidirectional benefits of community-academic relationships, favoring the university, leaving marginalized communities feeling exploited and further disenfranchised.

Amid the broader landscape of the more than five thousand American colleges and universities, urban- and metropolitan-located institutions of higher education are afforded a particular and unique set of possibilities and potential demands within this current context. Urban institutions are notable for their location and vibrant culture. Often centered in the heart of a metropolis, these institutions are within proximity of robust activity that is diverse and creative. The demographic diversity and expressionism that is present within the city often spill over into the institution itself through its students, faculty, and staff. Creating a sense of belonging, where every member of the campus community can be an active player in the growth and success of the institution, should be of high importance for every administrator, particularly those in senior leadership. Perhaps this sentiment is as important now as in previous years as postsecondary institutions are at a critical point of delivering a pertinent and high-caliber degree while being attentive and responsive to the surrounding community's needs.

Those institutions that accept the call to serve the communities in which they are located must find ways effectively to 1) recruit and educate diverse students from local communities, 2) leverage research knowledge and skills to respectfully partner with communities in collaboratively learning about ways to leverage community assets, and 3) address challenges faced by local neighborhoods, communities, and jurisdictions. As noted with substantial changes in the demographic profiles of the traditional-aged youth college attending population, the cohort changes in the professoriate (e.g., Davis and Fry, 2019), universities have increasing assets and human capital that may bring informed perspectives and experience in engaging with local communities. Still, these institutions must also consider how they can most effectively support the development, participation, and success of students, faculty, staff, and administrators from minoritized communities who work and learn at campuses in metropolitan areas.

The lingering presence of colorblindness and subtle acts of racial microaggressions poses a barrier to progress toward aspirations of campus harmony and any chance of true acceptance for members of underrepresented groups, particularly for persons of color in higher education. This is attributed to a failure to recognize racial inequities and dismiss their disadvantages (Bell, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2010). A culture that is inattentive to the plight of those from marginalized backgrounds can stifle the contributions and creativity of these individuals and restrict them from being their truest authentic selves. For metropolitan institutions, this type of dismissive practice is unacceptable.

Historically, institutional racism has been a barrier to progress in the U.S. (Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefanic, 2000). For the metropolitan university, there can be no compromise to ensure the campus culture and climate is accepting and free from intolerance and negativity. If an institution is going to be a true working and learning ecosystem for knowledge and discourse,

then the people, environment, and policies within must not threaten that aspirational feat by being restrictive, oppressive, and flat-out racist.

Leadership at the senior level can play a crucial role in urban institutional culture and climate. Cox (2001) noted that leaders must become aware of their diversity incompetence and commit to change for diversity change efforts to succeed within an organization. If a commitment to institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion is to be realized, it must come from the top.

Today's leaders at metropolitan institutions must not only be steeped in a simple appreciation for diversity but also possess the passion and skill required to drive that diversity throughout all corners of the institution. A carefully worded statement of support whenever a race-related issue or event occurs will no longer suffice. Words have to turn to action, and subsequent action must yield results. If college campuses have diversity initiatives that address culture and climate, our leaders must answer this call to lead. A simple convening of a committee or the hire of a cabinet-level diversity official is the cherry on top of tackling diversity. It is a start, but certainly not the end. The aftermath of the tragic death of George Floyd still resounds. There is a growing appreciation for the necessity of advancing inclusive communities in a substantive and meaningful way on college campuses. The attitudes of many students, faculty, and staff who support diversity initiatives are increasing. Let's not miss the moment to be great in doing diversity.

In the current issue, we use the lens of 'anti-racism' to explore opportunities for urban and metropolitan universities to inform and provide a perspective on efforts to support social justice and equitable outcomes for students, faculty, and communities. Anti-racism is a perspective and practice that is intentional and action-oriented in focusing on dismantling systems built on cultures within which racism is structurally embedded. "Anti-racism is the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organizational structures, policies and practices and attitudes, so that power is redistributed and shared equitably" (NAC International Perspectives: Women and Global Solidarity).

According to Kendi (2019), we consider that "The opposite of racist isn't 'not racist.' It is 'antiracist'… One endorses either the idea of racial hierarchy as racist or racial equality as an antiracist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people as a racist or locates the roots of problems in power and policies as an antiracist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere as a racist or confronts racial inequities as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of 'not racist'" (p. 9).

From a conceptual perspective, anti-racism extends beyond efforts to pursue the increased inclusion of individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds by addressing and dismantling systems and processes that support and replicate racist practices and outcomes. Previous

perspectives have explicitly or implicitly supported the assimilation of campus community members from underrepresented groups or sought to focus solely or primarily on the representative diversity of the campus community. An antiracist perspective acknowledges and understands the specific history of the United States and the tensions between the pluralistic aspirations of the country and the many universities within it. The goal of the antiracist perspective is to effectively integrate multiculturalism and intentional efforts to leverage inclusion and diversity as assets fundamental to the success and performance of the academy and all members of the academic community. Recent 'majority' cultural opposition and associated political performance, rhetoric, and bombast, such as efforts targeting critical race theory, ironically underline the need for perspectives that wholly take into account the American history of race and understand the role of race in the construction of social practices and institutional structures.

The following sections provide some essential background and framing considerations for examining the emerging literature on antiracist perspectives.

Barriers to effective programming and practices addressing racism

In pursuing the goal of antiracist urban institutions, there is the need to develop organizational cultures in higher education that 1) support informed practices in identifying and engaging students and faculty, 2) support antiracist curriculum and classrooms, 3) support practices that are equitable in the career development of minoritized faculty and administrators, as well as 4) support the equitable and informed development of knowledge through effective engagement with local communities. In admitting students and hiring faculty and staff, institutional leaders are morally obligated to create environments that lead to greater inclusivity. This can only be achieved when there is a shared understanding of what's required. Research has shown that cultural shifts can take place within an institution when there is an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of inclusive excellence, develop cultural competencies, and connect and engage with colleagues who are committed to the same end (Chun & Evans, 2018; Clayton-Pedersen and Clayton-Pedersen, 2008). Much follows from the affirmation and values that stem from appreciating and celebrating our differences.

As our nation, communities, and campuses grapple with COVID-19 and ongoing racial unrest, we must be intentional in efforts to develop cultural competencies and awareness of differences to mitigate against explicit and implicit bias and discrimination. On April 21, 2015, in an article for The Chronicle of Higher Education, Peter Schmidt noted: "College presidents are willing to address the racist, but rarely the racism." Over the last few years, because of national unrest, a national dialogue has ensued as colleges and universities struggle with how to "manage" campus discord while progressive students and faculty call for justice. The tension created by this

dichotomy has required academic leaders to identify and alleviate barriers to access and equity. Nevertheless, barriers still exist and are often insurmountable.

We are all too familiar with the barriers even amid campus crises, national unrest, or a visible and vocal call for redress by activist faculty, staff, and students. The key obstructions that can and will impede and interrupt real change and progress towards more inclusive campuses include:

- Institutional leaders who are reluctant to move beyond diversity statements to action plans and who only offer a performative commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Leadership's failure to dedicate adequate and appropriate levels of fiscal and human resources to address access and equity.
- Institutional failure to embed inclusive excellence best practices in the organizational structure.
- Campus reluctance to engage in uncomfortable conversations directly addressing discord related to social justice, privilege, and racism.
- Institutional postures of reactive responses to unrest versus proactive work and planning to address ongoing sociocultural challenges.

To facilitate the development of cultural competencies, which includes the meaningful and sustained personal and professional growth among faculty, staff, and administrators so they better understand the role they each individually and collectively can play in creating an affirming, inclusive and supportive environment, there must be an institutional commitment and will to provide relevant and effective learning opportunities. Cultural shifts will not happen on their own. Mitigating against bias, microaggressions and discrimination must be deliberate, ongoing, sustained, supported, and celebrated by leadership to garner the desired goal of broad buy-in to ensure adherence to appropriate behaviors and practices within boundaries and limits. Otherwise, colleges and universities will continue to be marred with discrimination, mistrust, and revolving doors for URM students, faculty, staff, and administrators.

Programming

Diversity training is commonplace in organizations today. Equality and diversity training has grown in importance in recent years across the higher education sector. Universities are increasingly accountable and responsible for ensuring good practices around equality and diversity. Effective diversity awareness training programs need to be in place in many organizations that want to be seen championing and effectively mainstreaming equality and diversity (Hayat & Walton, 2013, p. 304).

The objectives of these training vary. However, Yap et al. (2010) identify three primary objectives: (1) increased awareness, (2) reduced bias, and (3) changed behavior. Training varies from online short courses to multi-day year-long training programs. While online diversity training is prevalent in the workplace today, present-day conceptualizations of diversity training are often expanded; emphasizing individual development and considering various dimensions of diversity (Kulik et al., 2007). A recent study (Chang et al., 2019) found evidence of attitude change and limited behavior change because of a one-hour online inclusive leadership training module. Despite results suggesting that the one-off diversity training has some utility, such approaches are not solutions for achieving equity in the workplace.

Consequently, effective training designs consider the challenges that coincide with diverse learning environments and the value added to individual development and organizational transformation (Tan et al., 1996). That said, the practicality and value of diversity programming are often framed through the lens of institutional culture and climate rather than the impact on individual community members, even though both are necessary conditions to achieve equity. In ideal circumstances, diversity training becomes a joint effort to shift behavior, exhibit commitment, and dismantle structural barriers experienced by institutional members. Diversity training is often implemented in hopes of establishing or affirming a shift in individual behavior (Roberson et al., 2009).

Supporting Mutually Beneficial Collaborations with the Community

Community collaborative approaches, such as Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR), provide useful strategies that may inform campus efforts to pursue antiracist engagement with local communities. CBPR ensures collaborative and equitable community involvement in decision-making and throughout the research process. These approaches provide a model for community-academic partnerships that can empower communities to affect change (Florin & Wandersman, 1990). Specifically, CBPR provides a framework that regards community members as true partners in a mutual learning process between academics and community members (Minkler, 2000). In this approach, research is done collaboratively with communities, affirming the value of the community's knowledge and the co-creation of knowledge by the community and the academy (Leung et al., 2004).

Established CBPR principles include mutuality and equality among all partners, an open and transparent process, and the development of community-informed research/intervention strategies that build on the strengths of all partners (Israel et al., 2005; Seifer & Maurana, 2000). Mutuality and equity serve to foster ownership and empowerment among all partners. They can be established using several strategies, which include: 1) developing a shared mission among the community and academic partners, 2) ensuring shared power through mutual decision-making, and 3) fostering capacity building through learning exchanges that capitalize on the strengths of

each partner (Coker-Appiah et al., 2013). While these principles appear to have wide acceptance among researchers (Wells et al., 2004), putting them into practice can be challenging. To ensure true mutuality and equity in a community-academic partnership, each partner must feel validated, respected, and understood. In other words, partners must develop shared knowledge and a common framework for working together. Furthermore, this shared knowledge must include a nuanced understanding and appreciation of the complex history between the university and the community in which it is embedded, including the sociopolitical and structural realities of that history. If done effectively, community-academic partnerships that foster strong community involvement, as described above, can be instrumental in helping to prompt a transformational shift in higher education, a shift in which all universities substantively embrace anti-racism, actively advance social justice, and work to promote inclusive excellence.

About the Current Issue

In the current issue, we leverage the anti-racism lens to share articles that can support our understanding and efforts to address multiple levels of discrimination and bias within American urban colleges and universities. We have the opportunity to ask critical questions, including:

- What are the most effective ways to define, operationalize, and measure indicators of success in addressing relevant dimensions of equity, inclusion, and anti-racism at the individual, classroom, or institutional level?
- What are the most promising efforts addressing and measuring the impact of representation among the student body, among faculty as well as in university administration and leadership for urban institutions (e.g., how does representation impact critical outcomes such as student success? Campus climate? Enrollment growth or other key institutional goals?)
- How effective are education, training, and professional development initiatives for students, faculty, staff, and university leadership at urban and community-engaged institutions, including efforts and programs addressing urban institutions' racial culture and climate? What are we learning about community engagement that addresses systemic racism and inequality in the communities where urban institutions are located?
- What are emerging practices that support equitable relationships and mutually beneficial collaborations with the community?

We also note that the current context begs questions related to efforts focusing on the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color within urban institutions, including the opportunities and challenges offered by our expanded use of technology and access to these tools and the need to consider cultural disparities in mental health programming and

access which have been addressed in other special topics issues (e.g., See Metropolitan Universities Journal, Vol 33, No. 1: COVID-19 Innovations through Crises).

In the current issue, we share a series of empirical articles and commentaries that provide perspective on the achievements of cultural competence programming, the role of demographic representation, and institutional approaches to pursuing antiracist urban campuses. Among articles in the current issue Ratcliff (2022) discusses the findings of a quantitative, causal-comparative study that sought to determine if a statistically significant difference existed between two geographically-similar, demographically-different universities in terms of their White American male students' perceptions of Whiteness as ontological expansiveness as it relates to the tenets of critical whiteness theory (Cabrera et al., 2016). The study found that the White American male students' awareness and understanding of White racial identity and its relationship with physical and metaphorical space are greater in surroundings that have more diverse populations. This work helps us better understand how the context, urban location, and racial composition of college campuses may be associated with the greater understanding and salience of racial identity.

Work by Sweet et al. (2022) helps us better understand how perceptions and 'optics' of the experience of race, culture, and racism on an urban college campus are shaped by social position. The authors leverage their experience of work at three art exhibits to inform their qualitative analysis of data from campus diversity symposia. Cabler et al. (2022) present work that speaks to the role and impact of a diversity training program in the perception of cultural competence among higher education professionals on an urban college campus. Using mixed methods within a case study, the authors consider implications for individual career development and work at the organizational level. Smith et al. (2022) explore how community engagement is a strategy available to urban institutions to address, through partnership, goals pursuing anti-racism intentionally. In addition, potential means of assessing and measuring progress relative to these goals are also discussed. Gilliam et al. (2022) present a critical historical review and analysis of the experiences of a Southern urban university, UNC Greensboro, in pursuing 'embedded inclusive excellence' as a perspective on the advancement and pursuit of anti-racism at the institutional level.

Accompanying these articles, this special topic issue also includes three commentaries. Contributions by Daryl Smith and Alma Clayton-Pedersen, two national leaders in work on diversity, inclusion, and equity on American college and university campuses, provide the broader historical and national context in which to understand better and consider opportunities and efforts pursuing the goals of creating antiracist urban campuses. In addition, the issue includes a commentary by graduate students at an urban public institution, which presents student perspectives on the experiences of racism and the possibilities for antiracist work on College campuses. This piece provides a critical perspective for university administrators and

higher education researchers to consider as they attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the issues important to the next generation of scholars educated and trained on their campuses (Parker et al., 2022).

Although these pieces make a significant contribution, we understand that there is still much work to be done to deepen our understanding of effective policy and practice, including a better understanding of the impact of financial investments in anti-racism, equity, and inclusion work and barriers to effective programming and practices addressing racism on urban college and university campuses. However, we believe these pieces make a substantive and important contribution to our knowledge base and our pursuit of urban campuses that are working to intentionally engage in practices that address and dismantle the ongoing dysfunctional legacies of racism within the academy.

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