

Higher Education and the Importance of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Cynthia Jackson Hammond, Ed.D.

President, Council for Higher Education Accreditation

In a rapidly changing higher education landscape, the principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) have come under increasing scrutiny. As the President of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), I was recently invited to explain the state of diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education, reflecting on both its historical significance and the challenges it currently faces. The DEI acronym is commonplace; I prefer to use the actual words because, too often, the acronym marginalizes the true meaning and intent of these valued constructs.

To understand the present challenges, we must first examine the historical roots of equality in education. The historical roots of equality led to a broader discussion of equity. The idea of equality is not new. In fact, equality is a fundamental principle of the U.S. Constitution. The sentence "All men are created equal," refers to all individuals. The principle of equality can also be traced back to the civil rights movements of the 1960s when the U.S. government recognized the need to elevate marginalized groups and provide equal opportunities in education, employment, and society at large. Over the decades, equality has evolved to include broader considerations of race, gender, culture, disability, and economic status, striving to ensure that all individuals have a voice at the table. Equality means you are at the table, while equity means you have a fair opportunity to design and select the menu. Similarly, diversity and inclusiveness allow for different experiences in decision-making processes.

Institutions, particularly public colleges and universities, face growing pressure to navigate a complex landscape of state and federal policies. Some states have moved to curtail diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, while others continue to champion their importance. The great concern among institutions is not just about compliance but also about preserving the fundamental mission of higher education – creating spaces where diverse perspectives are respected and learning flourishes.

This raises an essential question: what role should higher education play in shaping inclusive and open learning environments? Higher education has long been a space for intellectual freedom, where students are encouraged to explore, debate, and grow. A college campus should be a place where students engage with people different from themselves, learn respect and civility, and develop the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate an increasingly diverse and complicated world. When institutions are restricted from discussing race, culture, and equity, they risk undermining the very essence of academic inquiry and democracy.

At the same time, policy decisions at the federal and state levels are creating new challenges for institutions striving to uphold the values of diversity, equity and inclusion. Federal policies, such as Title IV funding and Pell Grants, have historically played a role in ensuring access to education for underserved communities. However, recent shifts in legislative frameworks suggest a reevaluation of these policies at both the federal and state levels. Institutions are now grappling with how to maintain their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion while staying within legal boundaries. The Supreme Court's decisions and evolving state regulations are prompting higher education leaders to reframe their approaches without abandoning their core commitments to equity, diversity, and inclusion.

Despite these mounting obstacles, many institutions remain steadfast in their commitment to fostering inclusive environments. Higher education institutions remain resilient. Many are finding ways to

continue fostering inclusive environments, ensuring that students from all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging. The reality is that diversity, equity, and inclusion is not about granting special privileges to select groups—it is about leveling the playing field for all individuals, regardless of race, class, religion, gender, or ability.

Higher education leaders, accreditation bodies, and policymakers must work together to protect these values. As we move forward, organizations such as CHEA will remain committed to advocating for policies that support institutional autonomy while upholding the values of inclusion and equity. Accreditation organizations, policy groups, and institutions must work collaboratively to ensure that the higher education system continues to be a space of opportunity for all.

Ultimately, preserving diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education requires a unified and proactive approach. The future of equity in higher education depends on deliberate and informed action. While no single entity can mandate how institutions approach these valuable constructs, it is our collective responsibility to educate, discuss, and advocate for policies that reflect the ideas of a fair and just society. If diversity, equity, and inclusion are dismantled, there will be little to no legal guarantee that women, people with disabilities, religious groups, and other marginalized communities will have equitable representation at all levels of education and beyond.

Higher education has always been a catalyst for transformation. Let us ensure that it remains a space where every student, regardless of background, has a voice and an opportunity to succeed.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are a call for humanity. It is a call for how we view ourselves and how we view each other. If we cannot recognize the value of humankind, then we cease to be human.