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Reflections on and Contributions to Access, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ADEI)

As a scholar, teacher, and higher education administrator, I have built my professional career seeking and learning from diverse perspectives. In examining Western Washington University’s Strategic Plan, I am inspired by the ways in which its institutional ADEI goals lay out a set of values, provide means to shed light on unaddressed structural and systemic inequities, and create a collective call for action in their commitment to “meaningful inclusion” and the promise to “pursue justice and equity in policies, practices, and impacts.” The diversity of a campus strengthens the advancement of knowledge, perspective and provides opportunity for growth to all members of the university community. These outcomes not only serve students, faculty, and staff, but also impact society at large.

My own lived experiences as a student continue to inform in many ways my understanding of ADEI. I began my college career as someone from a struggling family who grew up far below the poverty line and who left an under-funded rural high school to complete college preparation courses at two different community colleges. I supported myself financially in those years by cleaning motel rooms to buy books and food and by working as an aid in a residential facility to have a place to live. From these experiences, I bring an understanding of the complexity of our students’ lives across the socio-economic spectrum. As an educator and an administrator, I work actively to honor and promote the diverse cultural capital of our students. From the grit of low-income “strivers,” to the intercultural competency and rich diversity within minoritized communities, to the resilience of students navigating intersectional identities and histories of trauma, these members of our campus communities bring skills and attributes that we need to value, nurture, and help them to understand as strengths.

The role of the provost is key in advancing collective commitments to ADEI. The provost should consistently invite academic leadership, faculty, and staff to apply an equity lens to their work. In leading a diverse and inclusive campus, a provost should focus on ways the community can foster inclusive classroom practices, support students of color to thrive, and engage with assessment findings to develop culturally responsive initiatives that will help advance ADEI goals. Reflecting with faculty on curriculum development and renewal through an equity lens is also critical if the university is to advance pathways that will assure inclusive student access and equitable outcomes. How and where might we be unconsciously or consciously perpetuating roadblocks for our students, particularly students from historically marginalized backgrounds? How and where might the curriculum need to be decolonized by centering hegemonic cultures and becoming more thoughtfully inclusive of minoritized voices? How can our syllabi and classrooms work to advance knowledge within our disciplines and social justice for our communities?

In terms of how my current work has advanced access, diversity, equity, and inclusion, I co-lead with the University’s Chief Diversity Officer a new pre-doctoral fellows program that is specifically designed to support the successful career launch of historically underrepresented doctoral students. We work closely with these young scholars to mentor them in the transition from graduate student to colleague, to support them as they build their professional understandings of teaching, service, and scholarship, and to assure that they find the connections and mentorship they will need to succeed as professors. I also
serve as liaison from Academic Affairs with the CDO (who reports to the Office of the President). We have collaborated on numerous presentations and communications designed to assist faculty in engaging students with an equity lens, to support inclusion in the classroom, and to assure support for diversity across campus.

My work as a writer and scholar likewise advances ADEI goals. As a scholar of post-colonial literatures (with a focus on Francophone writers of the Caribbean), I research and value the decolonization of knowledge and culture at all levels. As I’ve moved in recent years to the study of higher education itself, my focus has remained on the breadth and complexity of cultures, including institutional ones. My work examines how higher education needs to be reimagined to support equity, inclusion, and belonging of an increasingly diverse student body. Many of our educational systems and policies were built to exclude—by race or ethnicity, by gender expression or identity, by socio-economic standing, by age, by cultural background—rather than to include. My recent presentations and publications examine ways in which we can collectively reconceive our practices, by innovating to meet adult learners’ needs through addressing institutional barriers to student success, by drawing equity lessons for higher education from the COVID-19 crisis, and by addressing racial trauma in campus policing relations. I serve as co-editor and co-author of several chapters of a forthcoming book on “Acute Crisis Leadership: Lessons from the Pandemic” (Routledge Press, 2022), with explicit equity emphases in each chapter examining decision making in spring 2020 within different institutional areas (research, residence life, advancement, athletics, instruction, technology, etc.) across a range of campuses and sectors.

As a leader, I work to build diverse teams and to create spaces in which people can bring their whole selves. I was honored by William Paterson University in 2019 as a “Woman of Vision” for my commitment to this work as an educational leader on campus. Access, diversity, equity, and inclusion are the primary frames for what I do and how I work. Specific outcomes I can point to from this work include:

- Working to improve inclusive search processes and hiring outcomes as a dean with a resulting faculty profile after 10 years of the most diverse professoriate in the university whose composition more closely reflected the diversity of our students and who were committed to inclusive success;
- Supporting mentorship of statistically at-risk Black and Brown students through a faculty-led “Young Men of Color” initiative;
- Establishing a “First Generation” marketing and mentoring outreach program highlighting faculty members who had themselves been the first in their families to go to college and who were willing to guide first-gen students through their transition to the academy;
- Co-creating a “Safe Space” initiative that provided in-depth training and support for staff across the college to better understand LGBTQI+ concerns and challenges and to be willing to serve as visible allies;
- Building an “Aspire” program that supports career readiness and networking opportunities for a diverse range of students in the humanities and social sciences whose cultural capital was not supporting their career aspirations. The program provides mentorship, role models, and support for students through alumni connections, workplace visits, and LinkedIn, resume, and interview preparation.