

Why IT Matters to Higher Education

**EDUCAUSE**  
REVIEW

# Tackling Systemic and Structural Inequities in Higher Ed IT: A Primer on Beginnings

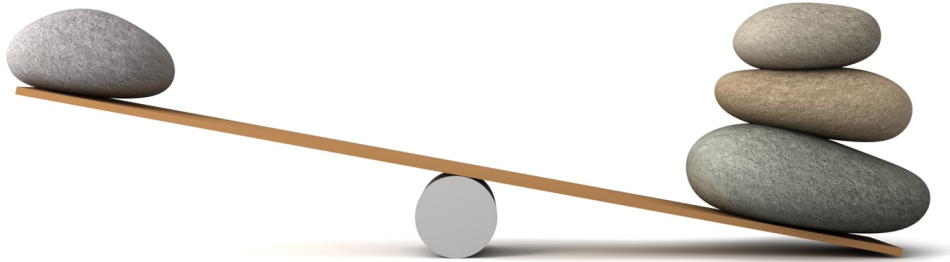
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Wednesday, April 19, 2023 **Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI)**

17 min read



In addition to improving our individual DEI education and practices, it is essential that we begin tackling structural and systemic inequity to make progress toward more inclusive organizations.



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Much of the conversation and programming related to diversity, equity, and inclusion on our campuses to date has focused on individual responsibility, including education, personal inquiry and discovery of implicit bias, and strategies to mitigate the impacts of bias. These conversations and actions are critical to progress.

A sustained focus on only the individual, however, runs the risk of obfuscating the broader, systemic sources of inequity and injustice in our society and our organizations. For example, one of us was surprised in a conversation with IT leaders by the suggestion that if we were all just nicer to one another we could eradicate racism, injustice, and inequity. This perspective suggests a limited understanding of the root causes of injustice, particularly structural and systemic inequity and their historical roles in creating our present. This perspective also emphasizes appearance over action, and as Layla Saad reminds us, "Your desire to be seen as good can actually

prevent you from doing good, because if you do not see yourself as part of the problem, you cannot be part of the solution."<sup>1</sup>

It is particularly essential for those with greater influence, including people who hold leadership positions, to engage with these issues and work to understand how they relate to their own organizations. Once we better understand how these systems and structures operate, we have the opportunity to use our agency to "iterate on our system designs to arc them toward more desirable impacts—both on the people within the system and on the people and communities affected by our institutions."<sup>2</sup>

## **Systems and Structures**

We cannot in the space of this article fully explore systemic or structural inequity. Below we define key terms as we use them here and provide recommendations for further reading. We provide the definitions and references to ground our recommendations, and we encourage readers to further explore the broader nuances and complexity of these concepts.

### **Definitions**

The definitions below were adapted from resources including the Annie E. Casey Foundation's "Equity vs. Equality and Other Racial Justice Definitions" and Kimberly Amadeo's article "What Is Structural Inequality?"<sup>3</sup> We have framed this article and these definitions to address institutions of higher education in the United States; thus, "society" here generally means U.S. society. We have also intentionally chosen to

prioritize equity (rather than equality) in our terminology; while they are sometimes used interchangeably, the two terms have unique and specific meanings in this context.

**Equality:** Providing everyone with the same resources in identical amounts; equality frequently results in inequitable outcomes because individuals do not all begin with the same resources or encounter the same challenges.

**Equity:** Providing what people need *as individuals* to reach the same or comparable outcomes, which varies according to an individual's starting point, including resources, as well as the challenges they encounter; equity often refers to fairness and justice.

**Inclusion:** The act or state of being included; more than just presence or representation, inclusion involves empowerment and belonging.

**Systemic and/or structural inequity:** Institutionally created and reinforced privilege for some groups of people and a lack of privilege and access to resources by others (for example, in law, policies, business practices, access to education, health care, banking, and housing).

**Systemic and/or structural racism:** Racial bias inherent in institutions and society; includes compounding and cumulative effects and the systemic disadvantaging of people of color along with the systemic privileging of White people.

## Why It Matters

Why is it important that we understand these systems and structures? Because—usually unconsciously—we reproduce these racist and otherwise inequitable systems and structures through our everyday actions. "The system of white supremacy was not created by anyone who is alive today. But it is maintained and upheld by everyone who holds white privilege—whether or not you want it or agree with it.... Systems do not change unless the people who uphold them change, and each person is responsible for upholding the system."<sup>4</sup>

As a result, we are reproducing harms by maintaining these structures. Many (perhaps most) of these structures are societal. They are pervasive across communities, geopolitical borders, and organizations. They are *very large, very resilient, and very difficult to change*. But we need not begin "at the top." We can begin by influencing change from where we are.

Achieving effective and sustainable change in the structures of our organizations requires collective action, focus, dedication, and accountability. It requires that people with influence—including privilege and power—leverage that influence for change, together and enduringly, to proactively move toward more inclusive processes and organizations. Importantly, this still requires a dedication to individual action to achieve broader goals, beginning with the acknowledgement that "neutrality" is not neutral.<sup>5</sup>

## What Can You Do?

Challenging systemic and structural issues can be very difficult, particularly on the level of the individual and even

more so outside of a leadership position or with limited influence. However, each of us can take specific actions:

- **Dedicate yourself to learning about structures of inequity.** We provide a suggested reading list at the bottom of this article; however, it is by no means exhaustive. Do research, and seek out a variety of perspectives.
- In addition to reading, **talk with colleagues.** But be cautious about asking people who have different identities from you to educate you. For example, if you are White, don't simply ask people of other ethnic or racial identities to educate you about these issues; be mindful and know that it is not anyone's responsibility to educate you on these matters; that individuals do not speak for their entire racial, ethnic, or other group; and sometimes people of color get tired of repeating the same lessons again and again. Join programs such as **Anti-Racism in Academia,** [↗](#) which curates a great **list of references.** [↗](#)
- **Internalize, don't personalize.** Society's current systems and structures of inequity were not created today, or yesterday, or ten years ago. However, our society *was created through and relies on structural inequity.* You are not personally responsible for the creation of these systems, but you might be responsible for their reproduction. You have the opportunity to internalize and act on values and priorities to influence these systems toward equity.
  - As you learn about these "hidden" systems, you may feel guilt; try to be sensitive to, patient with, and kind to yourself as you work through

these feelings. To move toward action, **consider the future and embrace your agency**: where are you now, and how can you effect change?

- **Evaluate your organization** for potential locations of structural inequity. If you have sufficient resources, consider hosting workshops or hiring a consultant to conduct an anti-racist or other equity-focused organizational assessment. If you don't have sufficient funds to hire an outside party, many free evaluation tools are available—can you dedicate resources in the form of time to this effort while providing professional development and learning opportunities to staff members?
  - Consider assessment results critically; **prioritize actions and dedicate resources to address the issues identified**. These results may include unit-specific or broader organizational issues—both formal and informal—related to everything from recruitment and hiring to performance evaluations, professional development, and career advancement for staff, as well as recruitment and educational practices for students. Melissa Woo provided a great example of this work: "Look at your job descriptions, the way that your search committees function, what their inherent biases are.... [Review job ads'] specific requirements stated for computer sciences bachelor's degrees.... [T]he issue I have about that specific requirement is that it is known that there are far, far fewer women and people of color who have bachelor's degrees in computer science. By

having that as a requirement you have artificially narrowed that candidate pool, so right up front there is a structural problem."<sup>6</sup>

- **Dedicate resources for DEI work.** This doesn't mean asking for volunteers who are sufficiently dedicated to DEI efforts to "fit it in" with their other responsibilities. Rather, this means providing time and, where appropriate, budget to invest in long-term efforts as an organizational priority.
  - "Organizational leaders often dramatically underestimate the time and resources required to genuinely achieve diversity, equity, and inclusion as outcomes,"<sup>7</sup> so be sure that you **ask those who are doing the work to inform your decisions about resources.**
  
- **Critically assess the culture of your organization.** Are you intentionally driving, prioritizing, and evaluating processes to identify bias in recruiting, evaluation, and advancing staff members? Are you seeking to identify bias not only at the level of individuals but in the processes you use?
  - Are you **working to cultivate and sustain increasingly inclusive cultures?** Do you assume that your organizational culture will evolve on its own, or are you deferring to others to do this work? Are you communicating—through both words and actions—that you are dedicated to fostering an inclusive and equitable culture? This can help with retention as well as advancing organizational performance.<sup>8</sup>



Leaders, in particular, must take ownership and responsibility for the current and future cultures of their organizations.

- As Vanessa Kaskiris stated: "To be successful in higher ed IT, it is critical to understand and acknowledge your organizational ethics and practices—to understand the culture that you are a part of so you can own it and make it better. The tension here is that **if you have been very successful within the predominant culture, you most likely do not want it to change**.... [T]rue leadership includes embracing this uncomfortable change, even if you previously benefited from the status quo, to raise the collective good."<sup>9</sup>
- As IT organizations are increasingly charged with delivering data, analytics, and artificial intelligence (AI), are you ensuring that data and IT governance groups are engaging with topics of equity and impact? **Data—from collection to categorization and management to reporting and interpretation—are not neutral.**<sup>10</sup> While IT organizations should not be the sole decision makers about these issues, we have the opportunity and the responsibility to prompt these conversations when they are not initiated by others. Otherwise, we are complicit in reifying existing structural inequities by replicating the "same old" uninterrogated processes.

## Commitments and Accountability

We have read many DEI-related messages from institutions of higher education (and corporations, nonprofits, and many others) over the past few years. With so many promises, is accountability feasible? Brian Basgen commented recently on this topic, particularly (though not only) for CIOs, pointing out that although more than 600 CIOs and other senior IT leaders have signed the **EDUCAUSE CIO's Commitment on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion**, there is a "noticeable absence of white CIOs involved in U.S. DEI efforts related to race" and asks, "How many [CIOs] strive to infuse DEI in every aspect of their leadership practice?"<sup>11</sup> We might push further and ask who (other than Basgen and a handful of colleagues) is asking? Who is holding CIOs—or any of us—accountable for more than a statement? We can practice accountability quietly, in private, and we can do it openly, in public; we need to embrace both approaches.

"Quiet" measures might include adding a priority or commitment to individual performance evaluations. While this is "private"—often known only to an individual and that person's supervisor—it prioritizes both the commitment and the work of advancing these efforts in a tangible way. This option also establishes a structure for both self-evaluation and external feedback. While this is a "quiet" measure, you could share your own DEI-related performance goal(s) with your team or with trusted colleagues, who can help hold you accountable for focus, effort, and progress.

Institutional and organizational data can be posted publicly to aid in broader and more public approaches to accountability, and this may become a more common approach. A recent EDUCAUSE QuickPoll highlighted that data and analytics will

be central to institutional efforts related to DEI strategies and commitments, with over half of survey respondents indicating that they are in the early stages (43%) or have already implemented analytics relevant to DEI goals across multiple departments (18%).<sup>12</sup> Effective use of data and analytics requires definition of institutional or organizational priorities, goals, and strategies, as well as appropriate means of measurement. Are you collecting the "right" data? Are those data valid, reliable, and relevant? Ultimately, what are you doing with the data—are you satisfied with incremental improvement of "diverse" representation within inequitable structures, or are you utilizing data to identify locations of systemic inequity for sustained focus and change (for example, using data to critically evaluate pay equity across race and gender, followed by implementation of a plan to address any gaps identified)? Be cautious of "...cosmetic diversity [which] too easily stands in for substantive change, with a focus on feel-good differences like food, language, and dress, not on systemic disadvantages associated with employment, education, and policing. Celebrating diversity, in this way, usually avoids sober truth-telling so as not to ruin the party."<sup>13</sup>

Remember, too, that this work is ongoing. Many organizations, particularly in the past few years, have published diversity statements, brought in speakers, and/or delivered one-time training. These efforts are valuable; however, "organizations large and small are often eager to fund one-time, 'inspirational' events to 'raise awareness' of inequity, but far less enthusiastic about medium-to-long term interventions that change incentive structures, shift the balance of power and resources, or reimagine personnel processes like evaluation, promotion, and conflict resolution."<sup>14</sup> Moreover, while some organizations

may have identified Diversity Officers and/or DEI Committees, the responsibilities for DEI efforts are ultimately not *only* the work of a select few; instead, these efforts—particularly those dedicated to systemic and structural change—require continued collaboration, sustained commitment, and intentional integration with broader efforts and priorities.

## What Can You Do?

- **Review the statements, commitments, and priorities of your institution** and its various organizations. Do they have substance, or are they addressing surface issues? Do they identify targets, goals, outcomes, and/or accountability measures?
- **Establish priorities and define goals for your unit, organization, or institution.** If so, are those paired with accountability measures, including but not limited to assignments for responsibility, transparency, and reporting? Identifying "owners" of a strategic outcome or priority doesn't have to shift responsibility for implementation fully to that person or unit; instead, doing so can assign responsibility for people expected to champion, advocate for resources, and advance those efforts.
  - Remember that you aren't expected to have all of the answers. In fact, you shouldn't think that you do. Engage in dialogue with your team and with colleagues about priorities, goals, and strategies defined to make progress in those areas. **Listen. Learn about different perspectives on priorities and the variety of ways you might make progress.**

- **Identify specific outcomes and priorities for leaders.** If you have the opportunity to incorporate goals related to DEI in evaluation of your own performance, have you done that?
  - Determine who might best hold you accountable and provide feedback on your progress. Is that only your supervisor, or does it also include your peers, your direct reports, your stakeholders, or some combination of those groups?
  - As you progress in your learning journey, reflect on whether your goals are internal (ongoing education and learning) or external (impact on the world around you). Are you ready to tackle some of the systemic and structural issues in your organization? Are you ready to commit to doing so?
  
- **Use your agency and influence—including any privilege and/or access to decision-making—to prioritize accountability.** Can you elevate the questions and concerns of students and lower-ranking staff members to leadership? Can you ask about—or help define—DEI performance measures for your organization? Can you identify organizational systems and processes that are exclusionary and request that they be revised?
  
- **Leverage opportunities in governance programs.** How mature is data governance at your institution? The IT organization can be a campus leader for data governance to enable responsible data management

and reporting around DEI outcomes and priorities. Analysts can incorporate DEI principles in discussions and designs for data reporting, including the design of accurate and easily understood visualizations. IT staff members can also help develop data literacy among faculty, staff, and administrators to effectively evaluate data and make data-informed decisions to advance DEI goals.

- One great example of DEI-informed data governance in action is the **University of Washington's guidance on pronoun data governance and integration.** [↗](#) This resource—and the population of the data across solutions—outlines goals including affirming gender identity and enabling self-identification of members of the University of Washington community, with the explicit aim of supporting a more inclusive, equitable, and welcoming environment.
- **Establish DEI goals as central components in your strategic plan,** and define outcomes, impacts, and performance indicators. This helps illustrate their relevance to an organization as well as to the organization's strategic priorities, which can bolster support.

## **Confronting Systems, Encountering Challenges**

You will encounter endless challenges as you grow your awareness of—and seek to change—the inequitable structures

of our everyday lives. These challenges might be external (outside of our organizations) or internal (within our organizations, or even within ourselves). Sometimes these challenges present as resistance; whether that resistance is internal or external, moments when we encounter resistance provide an excellent reminder to pause. Can you identify that resistance and remain curious? Can you seek to learn about the causes for resistance, which may include fear, defensiveness, or lack of knowledge or understanding?

Consider admissions: "The admissions realm, forever talking up its lofty ideals but forever entrenched in the relentless competition for revenue and indicators of institutional awesomeness, is a system at odds with itself. But it does, more or less, what it was built to do."<sup>15</sup> In other words, admissions at most institutions is a process that was designed to exclude; the development of college and university admissions processes, which are rooted in the pre-Civil Rights era, reinforce the structural inequities evident in broader society. While some are tackling the work of rebuilding this system,<sup>16</sup> college and university boards, administrators, and faculty (those with structural advantages) are likely to challenge and resist these efforts on broad scales, for a wide variety of reasons. This is not surprising. This is an example of the existing system protecting itself, seeking to reinforce and replicate existing structures.

Even among those who are prepared for difficult work and uncomfortable truths, wrestling with the impacts of the structures we've long upheld can be difficult. As Deepa Purushothaman cautions, "Let's not pretend that the workplace, anywhere in the world, is a pure meritocracy. Too

often, the emphasis on working harder is just code for upholding double standards in a rigged system. When we can tell the truth about the fact that the workplace shows up differently for us, it's a form of power. It protects us from the cognitive dissonance of what we experience vs. what we're told is true, and gives us permission to push on systems that are outdated and unfair."<sup>17</sup> Some who are in mid-level and senior leadership positions frequently do not want to believe that anything other than their knowledge, skill, and ability helped them attain their roles; owning our privilege is difficult, and acknowledging its role in our present can be painful. But this internal conversation is essential to understanding our own role in reproducing the systems and structures that surround us and to taking a step toward making change.

## What Can You Do?

- **Prepare to encounter internal challenges** and plan to take on some personal work. Prepare to be honest, vulnerable, and kind to yourself. Build a support network of colleagues similarly dedicated to this effort with whom you can unpack your experiences and learn from them.
- **Get connected.** Engage with communities and organizations dedicated to this work, which you might find locally, regionally, or nationally (the **EDUCAUSE Diversity in IT Community Group** is a great place to start).
- **Influence change from where you are.** You don't have to hold a formal leadership position to influence change.



- Academic technologists at the University of Minnesota outlined specific anti-racist practices that they are employing to influence change in their spheres of influence, including within their organizations and in pedagogical practice.<sup>18</sup>
- Are you active on social media? Amplify voices of people with identities different from yours.
- Do you present and/or publish regularly? Seek colleagues with identities different from your own with whom to collaborate. Ensure that you are listening to them, and make space for their contributions.<sup>19</sup>
- As an individual, be **clear about your own goals** in taking on this work. Identify your "why" and return to it when you encounter challenges.
- **Push back—or nudge forward**—where you can. One respondent to EDUCAUSE's QuickPoll on DEI analytics responded that "People have not bought into the idea that analytics help with DEI.... They're mostly worried about analytics causing harm."<sup>20</sup> If you find yourself in this space, help those around you explore their concern and discomfort, knowing that this may be uncomfortable for you as well. Is the concern rooted in a desire to avoid less-than-ideal optics? Does avoiding the realities of the present help achieve a desired future state? Might engaging with analytics as a starting point help us engage more meaningfully with the topic of "cosmetic diversity" and how we might aim for more substantive change?<sup>21</sup>
- Remember that **"starting small" can be very effective**. As you work toward change, and as you encounter

challenges and resistance, you may have to adjust your goals and expectations.

- It may be helpful to know that "social movements typically start small. They begin with a group of passionate enthusiasts who deliver a few modest wins. While these wins are small, they're powerful in demonstrating efficacy to nonparticipants, and they help the movement gain steam. The movement really gathers force and scale once this group successfully co-opts existing networks and influencers. Eventually, in successful movements, leaders leverage their momentum and influence to institutionalize the change in the formal power structures and rules of society."<sup>22</sup>

## Outcomes

We have work to do. Each of us holds different relationships with the inequitable systems and structures that surround us. Each of us holds different types of influence and privilege and, with them, different capacities. Our responsibility is to use those resources to influence change and make progress toward more equitable and inclusive organizations, regardless of the number of us within an organization. Even small groups of people—even individuals—can initiate change.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation defines "systemic equity" as "a complex combination of interrelated elements consciously designed to create, support and sustain social justice."<sup>23</sup> Our recommendations here represent some of the initial actions in

progress toward that intentional design; sustained advancement will require coordinated, sustained, and focused efforts, on a scale as broad as we can mobilize.

## Reading List

- W. Kamau Bell and Kate Schatz, *Do the Work: An Antiracist Activity Book* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2022).
- Karen Caitlin, *Better Allies: Everyday Actions to Create Inclusive, Engaging Workplaces* (Better Allies Press, 2021).
- Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).
- Crystal Fleming, *How to Be Less Stupid About Race* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018).
- bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- Mikki Kendall, *Hood Feminism: Notes From the Women That a Movement Forgot* (New York: Viking, 2020).
- Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019).
- Bettina Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019).

- Ijeoma Oluo, *So You Want to Talk About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).
- Rafia Zakaria, *Against White Feminism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021).

## Notes

The authors would like to extend a thank-you to **ARiA program leaders** [↗](#) and particularly to ARiA workshop facilitators at the EDUCAUSE 2021 Annual Conference, where the authors met.

1. Layla Saad, *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, 2020), 43. [↩](#)
2. Stephanie Moore, "**Reclaiming Resilience: Building Better Systems of Care,**" *EDUCAUSE Review*, July 12, 2022. [↩](#)
3. Annie E. Casey Foundation, "**Equity vs. Equality and Other Racial Justice Definitions,**" [↗](#) April 14, 2021; Kimberly Amadeo, "**What Is Structural Inequality?**" [↗](#) *The Balance*, March 26, 2022. [↩](#)
4. Saad, *Me and White Supremacy*, 3 and 209. [↩](#)
5. Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Medford, Massachusetts: Polity Press, 2019). [↩](#)
6. Melissa Woo, Cynthia Golden, and Jack Suess, "**Melissa Woo on Communicating,**" *EDUCAUSE & The Integrative CIO Podcast*, February 10, 2022. [↩](#)

7. Lily Zheng, **"The Failure of the DEI-Industrial Complex,"** [Harvard Business Review](#), December 1, 2022. ↩
8. Melissa Woo, Keith McIntosh, and Deborah Stanley-McAulay, **"How to Plug the Leaky Bucket: Retention Strategies for Maintaining a Diverse Workforce,"** *EDUCAUSE Review*, May 7, 2018. ↩
9. Vanessa Kaskiris, **"How University IT Leaders Can Support Marginalized Communities,"** [EdTech](#), November 17, 2022. ↩
10. Benjamin, *Race After Technology*. ↩
11. Brian Basgen, **"Committing to DEI Work: Are You Engaged?"** *EDUCAUSE Review*, January 25, 2022. ↩
12. Jenay Robert, **"EDUCAUSE QuickPoll Results: Using Analytics to Advance Equity Goals,"** *EDUCAUSE Review*, February 4, 2022. ↩
13. Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 19–20. ↩
14. Zheng, "The Failure of the DEI-Industrial Complex." ↩
15. Eric Hoover, **"An Admissions Process Built for Racial Equity? This Report Imagines What It Would Look Like,"** [Chronicle of Higher Education](#), January 19, 2022. ↩
16. See, for instance, Institute for Higher Education Policy, **"Opening the Promise:" The Five Principles of Equitable Policymaking,"** [January 2022](#). ↩
17. Deepa Purushothaman, **"Stop Telling Young Women of Color to Accept a Broken System,"** [Harvard Business Review](#), June 22, 2022. ↩

18. Louise Delagran, Cristina Lopez, Asa Olson, Sara Schoen, and Tracy Thomas Wilson, **"How Academic Technologists Can Bring Anti-Racism into Our Work,"** *EDUCAUSE Review*, July 15, 2022. ↩
  19. W. Kamau Bell and Kate Schatz, *Do the Work: An Antiracist Activity Book* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2022). ↩
  20. Robert, "EDUCAUSE QuickPoll Results: Using Analytics to Advance Equity Goals." ↩
  21. Benjamin, *Race After Technology*, 19–20. ↩
  22. Brian Walker and Sarah A Soule, **"Changing Company Culture Requires a Movement, Not a Mandate,"** *Harvard Business Review*, June 20, 2017. ↩
  23. Annie E. Casey Foundation, **"Equity vs. Equality and Other Racial Justice Definitions."** ↩ ↩
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