Who Benefits?: A Critical Race Analysis of the (D)Evolving Language Of Inclusion in Higher Education

By Jessica C. Harris, Ryan P. Barone, and Lori Patton Davis

The primary purpose of this paper is to expand the ways in which educators and scholars employ the concepts of diversity, social justice, and inclusive excellence in relation to racial inclusivity. Our goals are to help educators identify and acknowledge the intentional and unintentional consequences of maintaining white supremacy within higher education, despite espoused efforts to dismantle racism. For the sake of clarity and consistency, we refer to all three of these concepts—diversity, social justice, and inclusive excellence—in terms of race-based inclusion initiatives. Our focus on race is rooted in the ever-present role of race and racism in the academy, and in the sustained attempts to either avoid or dilute
them. Given the emphasis on race and racism, we employ critical race theory (CRT) to demonstrate how diversity, social justice, and inclusive excellence, as well as the efforts that stem from them, are often co-opted to promote agendas that maintain the status quo and uphold white privilege, rather than serve racially minoritized people.

**White leaders typically tolerate advances toward racial inclusion as long as those advances are not too severe and do not disrupt the status quo.**

Interest convergence is used as the primary lens of analysis throughout the remainder of this discussion because it captures the process whereby inclusion initiatives emerge with great intentions and expectations, but do not end with the actualization of equity. Crenshaw noted, “Critical race projects have occupied both deconstructionist and interventionist spaces... Critical Race Theory, both in its traditional interactions and in an expanded articulation, can and should disrupt racial settlement and push for conceptual tools.” Diversity, social justice, and more recently inclusive excellence, have been touted as conceptual tools that, by definition, are used to disrupt racial settlement. However, examining these conceptual tools within a CRT framework, and more specifically with interest convergence, reveals how these inclusion initiatives afford procedural rights but not substantive outcomes. Students of color may be given access to higher education, but they are not set up for success once they arrive on campus. Racial inclusion initiatives also focus on equality as a process rather than an outcome—and, in doing so, ignore inequities of the past to focus on future, individual, and isolated offenses against people of color. In this analysis we use interest convergence to examine the (de)volving language of inclusion in U.S. higher education.

### RACE-BASED INCLUSIVITY IN U.S. EDUCATION

**Diversity**

The concept of campus diversity emerged in the 1970s, and typically was framed as a numbers game focused almost exclusively on increasing the totals and, to a lesser extent, the percentages, of racially minoritized students on college campuses. In the 1980s, a resurgence occurred around race-based inclusivity with a focus on “diversity” and its associated benefits for society, broadly, and higher education, specifically. This relatively new concept focused primarily on the benefits for white students of “experiencing” racial diversity and having visible representation of people...
When colleges employ diversity principles to enact access, they typically are not required to interrogate the institutional whiteness prevalent in the structure, practices, and assumptions of PWIs. This means that colleges facilitate access on a procedural level, not on a substantive level. For example, granting access to higher education for students of color is a procedural right. Unfortunately, this access is not substantive; it does not guarantee students' success within higher education. Furthermore, procedural rights provide “proof that society is indeed just” to individuals of color and their allies, quelling their fight for equal access to education, and more importantly, disruption of the status quo.

Interest convergence also offers a critique of the commodification of diversity for institutional benefit, or the practice of marketing structural/visual diversity to attract students-as-consumers. It also complicates the manner in which the socially constructed concept of race is manipulated to uphold power structures. Institutional leaders, who are overwhelmingly white, may manipulate and construct a diverse student body to serve institutional needs. A striking example of this manipulation was the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s 2000 decision to Photoshop a picture of a black student into promotional materials. Subsequently, 100,000 admissions booklets were distributed with a fabricated illusion of racial diversity. Similar allegations recently have arisen at Scripps College, where, according to current students, racially minoritized students were “duped” into attendance by a misrepresentation of racial inclusion on the institutional website and recruitment materials.

Using the concept of diversity to racially integrate campuses is largely palatable to administrators in power because token incrementalism in terms of racial heterogeneity does not substantially threaten generations of institutionalized racial privilege. Bell and Hartman explained that this perspective of diversity, “starts from the dominance of white worldviews, and sees the culture, experiences, and indeed lives, of people of color only as they relate to or interact with the white world.”

SPECIAL FOCUS: EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

While an increase in student diversity likely generated more cross-cultural learning, interest convergence informs the question “learning for whom?”

CRT Analysis of Diversity

While an increase in student diversity likely generated more cross-race cultural learning on college campuses, interest convergence informs the question “learning for whom?” Despite diversity efforts in higher education, racially minoritized students often are treated like “native informants” in the classroom, and the benefit of racial diversity at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) becomes unidirectional, with racially minoritized students carrying the burden of educating their white peers. Interest convergence also critiques the groups that sometimes gain access to higher education through diversity-rationalized affirmative action admissions programs. Scholars have found that people with multiple marginalized identities, such as women of color, have not benefited from affirmative action at the same rate as white women and men of color. Moreover, students (the vast majority of whom are white) are much more likely to benefit from legacy admissions preferences than are people of color to be assisted by affirmative action.
diversity centers whiteness as normative, or an ideal way of being, forcing racially minoritized students to assimilate to white culture to succeed. Unfortunately, traversing and learning the norms of white culture may be detrimental to racially minoritized students, as they are forced to consign their own culture to the margins.

With the broadening of diversity as an umbrella concept to encompass many social identities beyond race, the political impact of diversity as a means for facilitating systemic change is somewhat limited. Actions justified through stated goals of diversity without acknowledgment of the longstanding effects of privilege, power, and oppression equate to an inability to facilitate meaningful change toward inclusion on college campuses. In part due to the failure of diversity efforts to make any real change, the concept of social justice gained prominence in U.S. higher education during the latter half of the 20th century.

**The Fluidity of Social Justice**

The concept of social justice has changed and adapted since John Rawls first introduced it in 1971. Rawls likened social justice to distributive justice, or the equal distribution of goods and services to all. However, 20 years after Rawls’s conceptualization, distributive justice fell short in addressing the systemic and institutional structures that determined distribution of resources, including those in higher education. From this realization came a re-envisioning of social justice, one “where assimilation to majority or dominant cultural norms is no longer the price of equal respect.” Different from diversity, social justice necessitates an analysis of power and privilege on individual and institutional levels. While diversity still has social relevance on its own, when used in tandem with social justice it conveys a broader conceptualization beyond numerical representation toward quality of interactions and cross-cultural engagement.

Social justice education draws much of its pedagogy, epistemology, and instructional practices from Women’s Studies, Queer Studies, and Ethnic Studies. A frequently used definition is:

Social justice is both a process and a goal. The goal of social justice is full and equal participation for all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs. Social justice includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable and all members are physically and psychologically safe and secure.

Social justice education has gained tremendous momentum as a component of student learning in U.S. colleges and universities. CRT Analysis of Social Justice

A key distinction between diversity efforts and social justice initiatives is that the former often focus on equal distribution and numbers, while the latter are more concerned with systems of power and inequity. “It does not necessarily follow that a diverse institution will either address all the concerns faced by students of color or work toward greater equity and social justice,” Castagno and Lee explained. By focusing more on privilege, power, and oppression, social justice has a more activist trajectory than previous concepts. Nonetheless, its potency for transformation and its comprehensive goals of inclusivity, contextualized by the history of racial oppression in the U.S., still can be mitigated or appropriated by dominant educational narratives.

An interest-convergence analysis of social justice in higher education reveals policies and practices that are not always in the best interest of racially minoritized students. For instance, initiatives contained within the umbrella of social justice in higher education have become so expansive that they often function to limit critical discussions about race and racism. One such initiative is the hiring of diversity officers or the implementation of offices that focus on campus diversity. While seemingly helpful, these offices and positions often allow institutions to compartmentalize their efforts toward combating racism. The results, such as diversity mission statements or climate assessment data that is minimally

**Different from diversity, social justice necessitates an analysis of power and privilege on individual and institutional levels.**

**By focusing more on privilege, power, and oppression, social justice has a more activist trajectory than previous concepts.**

**CRT Analysis of Social Justice**

A key distinction between diversity efforts and social justice initiatives is that the former often focus on equal distribution and numbers, while the latter are more concerned with systems of power and inequity. “It does not necessarily follow that a diverse institution will either address all the concerns faced by students of color or work toward greater equity and social justice,” Castagno and Lee explained. By focusing more on privilege, power, and oppression, social justice has a more activist trajectory than previous concepts. Nonetheless, its potency for transformation and its comprehensive goals of inclusivity, contextualized by the history of racial oppression in the U.S., still can be mitigated or appropriated by dominant educational narratives.

An interest-convergence analysis of social justice in higher education reveals policies and practices that are not always in the best interest of racially minoritized students. For instance, initiatives contained within the umbrella of social justice in higher education have become so expansive that they often function to limit critical discussions about race and racism. One such initiative is the hiring of diversity officers or the implementation of offices that focus on campus diversity. While seemingly helpful, these offices and positions often allow institutions to compartmentalize their efforts toward combating racism. The results, such as diversity mission statements or climate assessment data that is minimally
Well-intentioned social justice programming may also reinforce essentialism—the notion that a group of people share or can be defined by one experience.

The critique of systems of oppression with a focus on intersecting identities is essential in social justice engagement.

Many popular social justice experiences facilitated on college campuses, when analyzed from an interest-convergence perspective, teach white students at the cost or expense of racially minoritized students. Programs such as “privilege walks,” where students take actual steps across a room to mark their personal and group privileges, typically result in white people in the front of a room and racially minoritized students in the back. This social positioning is likely not surprising for racially minoritized students, and facilitators often devote substantial time to helping white students process through the associated guilt for being at the front of the group. Similar patterns can manifest in other co-curricular social justice programs such as one-time activities and simulations with students (e.g., Tunnel of Oppression). Often these programs perpetuate a deficit-based narrative of communities of color. Moreover, programming under the social justice umbrella focused on simply presenting stereotypical cultural artifacts (e.g., “Food, Festivals, and Fetish”) make institutions appear committed to social justice, while undermining its very ideas.

While the definition of social justice by Adams, Bell, and Griffin ideally represents systemic institutional transformation, the implementation of social justice on many college campuses has followed a trajectory similar to diversity in that its radical aspirations remain unrealized. Definitional uncertainty, mainstream cooptation, and the allure of a sexy buzzword all limit the impact of the social justice concept. In part to remedy the deficit-based nature of diversity efforts and to build on social justice principles, inclusive excellence was introduced.

Inclusive Excellence

In 2005, the Association for American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) commissioned three separate reports that pointed out structural barriers within inclusion initiatives that continue to deter student success. First, institutions create multiple diversity initiatives in isolation, rather than in collaboration with one another. Second, campus constituents do not recognize the connection between diversity and educational excellence. The AAC&U argued that racially minoritized students would succeed in college when an inclusion framework that incorporates diversity at its core is actualized. Third, the ever-widening achievement and opportunity gap for racially minoritized students “signals failure, not only for the individual students affected but also for the colleges and universities they attend and the educational system as a whole.”

Last, the affirmation for the value of diversity in higher education was seen in the rulings in the University of Michigan Supreme Court cases and largely upheld in the more recent Fisher v. Texas case.
This cooptation of racial-justice organizations is not limited to Ford; collectively, major U.S. philanthropies, “act in the long-range interests of the corporate world.”

CRT Analysis of Inclusive Excellence

One of the most interesting aspects of the AAC&U’s papers is how and through whom these documents, and therefore inclusive excellence, came to fruition. The Ford Foundation funded the inclusive excellence literature.\(^4^6\) Their support is extremely relevant because the Ford Foundation, which many may categorize as a liberal foundation, has a history of involvement in counterinsurgency programs in the U.S. and other countries.\(^4^7\) In the 1960s, the Foundation began investing large amounts of money in the Congress of Racial Equality and other civil rights organizations, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the National Urban League, in hopes of calming growing racial unrest in U.S. cities.\(^4^8\) Interest convergence was exposed when the Ford Foundation gave “massive help” to urban black communities so that racial tension would not ignite the dissolution of U.S. cities, the rebuilding of which would fall to whites, not blacks.\(^4^9\) In essence, the Ford Foundation invested time and money in race-based organizations to conquer, divide, and “channel and control the black liberation movement and forestall future urban revolts.”\(^5^0\)

This cooptation of racial-justice organizations is not limited to Ford; collectively, major U.S. philanthropies, “act in the long-range interests of the corporate world. Their trustees and staff are typically members of the power elite, but they have added blacks, women, Hispanics, and others to broaden support and deflect criticism.”\(^5^1\) Higher education is not immune to this cooptation and interest convergence may be present in the funding and implementation of inclusive excellence on college campuses.

While this paper focuses on concepts related to inclusion, it is noteworthy that inclusive excellence does not often mention the intersections of race with other identities. The AAC&U’s almost exclusive focus on race and racism is new to the rhetoric of inclusion, but its focus on this social identity and system of oppression does not account for the complexity of intersecting identities and oppressions, resulting in inclusive excellence’s inability to fully address and break down all barriers to realize inclusive education.\(^5^2\) Additionally, the three AAC&U documents do not aim to address the systemic oppression deeply embedded in the majority of higher education institutions today. For example, in Making Diversity Work on Campus, Milem and colleagues stressed the importance of hiring faculty of color because it diversifies the professoriate and because these individuals “are also more likely than other faculty to include content related to diversity in their curricula and to utilize active learning and student-centered teaching techniques.”\(^5^3\) Meanwhile, as faculty of color enact inclusive pedagogy in their classrooms and carry the onus of inclusion, the authors of the documents would allow “other faculty” (i.e., white) to continue their exclusive educational practices.

Several U.S. institutions of higher education have adopted the inclusive excellence concept on their campuses. For example, the University of Missouri has begun awarding faculty and staff for their work with inclusive excellence. However, these types of awards may obscure true racial progress. The creation of an award to recognize inclusive achievements quantifies and commodifies inclusive excellence, making it seem measurable and achievable. In other words, these awards purport that one only needs to do so much to achieve inclusivity. The commodification of
inclusive excellence and its economic benefit conferred on the dominant culture is also apparent in the AAC&U and the American Council on Education’s consulting and training fees. Additionally, the proceeds from these fees benefit individuals and organizations, the majority of whom are white. As Bell noted, “once again, the rhetoric obscures the issues” allowing for the subtle maintenance of structures that uphold white privilege and supremacy to remain as the building blocks of higher education.

**CHALLENGING ENTRENCHED SYSTEMS**

Within the last 45 years, activist-scholars have envisioned radical reform in higher education to meaningfully restructure the antiquated views on curricula, policies and procedures, and pedagogies originally constructed for and by white men. However, these radical calls for new educational efforts often have been co-opted and systematized by institutions and people in power, resulting in limited progressive aims. An incremental approach to inclusion without simultaneously challenging institutional hegemony will have, at best, a null or, at worst, a negative impact toward a vision for equity in higher education.

We assert that the devolving language of racial inclusions has supported this incremental approach to change. “Well-intentioned policies committed to creating a more inclusive campus climate may unwittingly reinforce practices that support exclusion and inequity.” Jargon-laden diversity statements, policies, and commitments, which are not explicitly critical of systems of institutionalized privilege, are destined to fail. “Higher education as a whole…may well be performing contradictory functions—for example, bolstering and reproducing privilege and inequality at the same time as they are creating new knowledge of benefit to all.” As explored above, these contradictory functions often are found in the rhetoric of diversity, social justice, and inclusive excellence.

Understanding the trajectory of inclusivity rhetoric in higher education can help educators become aware of the need to challenge entrenched belief systems while also moving them toward acknowledging their own complicity. Critical race theory can help this cause and “develop a broader project, one that interrogates the limitations of contemporary race discourse both in terms of its popular embodiment and its epistemic foundations.” One way to meet this challenge is through identifying and naming the hegemony in the academy that privileges the status quo and, by extension, those individuals with generational privilege in U.S. society.
“Identifying dominant discourses that reflect and shape contemporary images of diversity can provide another lens for understanding diversity in higher education.”

The goals of diversity and social justice in higher education have not been realized: Do we need newly articulated movements such as inclusive excellence? Who benefits from this evolution? Educators should view the (de)volving language and policies of inclusion with skepticism, while critically examining its potential and utility in higher education.

END NOTES


3. We use the term racially minoritized and not racial minority, “to signify the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in U.S. social institutions, including colleges and universities. Persons are not born into a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social context...Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of whiteness.” See Harper, “Race without Racism: How Higher Education Researchers Minimize Racist Institutionalized Norms,” p. 9.


7. Ibid.


24. Ibid. The cut-and-pasted student, Diallo Shabazz, sued and won $10 million, which he pledged to direct toward recruiting racially minoritized students throughout the University of Wisconsin system, though ultimately much of the money never went to diversity initiatives.


29. Ibid, p. 3.


36. Pasque, *op cit*.


38. See Adams, et al., *op cit*, Reason and Davis, *op cit*.

39. This is an interactive experience in which participants walk through a “tunnel” of oppression, which are depicted through acting, pictures, monologues, and such.


41. Ibid.

42. Adams, et al., *op cit*.

43. Williams, et al., *Toward a Model of Inclusive Excellence and Change in Postsecondary Institutions*.

44. Ibid, pp. vii-viii.


47. Association of American Colleges and Universities, “From the Editor: A Liberal and Liberating Education for All.


51. Ibid.
52. Ibid, p. 73.
53. Roelfs, op cit, p. 25.
56. Bell, op cit, p. 138.
57. See Ladson-Billings and Tate, op cit; and Pasque, op cit.
58. Iverson, op cit, p. 152.
60. Crenshaw, op cit, p. 1351.
61. Iverson, op cit, p. 149.

WORKS CITED


Patterson, Lori D., Riyad A. Shahjahan and Nana Osei-Kofi. 2010. “Introduction to the Emergent Approaches to Diversity and Social Justice in Higher Education Special Issue.” Equity & Excellence in Higher Education 43, no. 3.


