Understanding DEI: A Consultant's Perspective

In the climate in which we operate today, understanding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is complicated and seems to evolve at regular intervals. I've tried to find the mainstream definitions that generally remain consistent as the core points of reference. I find this helpful in application to my work in Traditional and Proprietary Higher Education. There are numerous similarities, overlap, and of course differences and nuances within those differences, definitions and points-of-view. Then, there is the ever-changing terminology within DEI. Consequently, it can be easier to avoid the subject of DEI unless absolutely necessary, or occasionally when confronted over views that someone finds counter to their understanding of DEI.

However, for many of us that "absolutely necessary" stop on the carousel has arrived. Today, one finds that the traditional and historic genders roles and ways that individuals view themselves and feel part of society are markedly different. No one wants to feel excluded and no one wants to make people feel that way. That was my thinking, at the very least, in looking to cull out a nuts-and-bolts definition for basic clarity of DEI for the work our team does. The need to understand DEI beyond my own personal interest has become a necessity in this field as a consultant to institutions within higher education.

Since higher education is an environment in which differences in point-of-view are expected, nurtured and typically embraced, I began to study and research more about DEI. I started by exploring the definitions of diversity, equity, and inclusion [of which there are several] in context of higher education professionals and employers. I searched for and found the definitions listed below, and are credited to both UC Berkeley Center for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity and the University of Houston's Center for Diversity and Inclusion, and which seem to be good universal descriptors. [https://diversity.berkeley.edu/; and https://uh.edu/cdi/]

Diversity: Includes but is not limited to race, color, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, veteran status, education, marital status, language, age, gender, gender expression, gender identity, sexual orientation, mental or physical ability, genetic information, and learning styles.

When thinking about diversity it is important to remember the terminology today has expanded. When I started in this field more than 30 years ago, diversity was equated to racial and ethnic minorities. Other factors in one's identity where not considered, because in many instances they were not known, or individuals chose to keep that private. Now, jumping ahead to the late 20th Century and forward, factors such as socioeconomic status or gender identity may be considered when referring to diverse populations. With this broadened definition, inclusivity of someone's varied identifies are considered. It also becomes more difficult to have "perfect diversity" at all times. One needs to consider what diversity in a particular setting is attempting to achieve, and to avoid name calling and assigning malicious intent if they unintentionally

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miss the target. For example, are you creating a work team to approach a business issue; are you building a new department or business, are you tackling an assignment or issue that requires you to bring together individuals to solve or resolve it? If so, you need to be cognizant of both the competencies needed to achieve the outcome as well as ensuring that it is a broad-based and diverse group to include the perspectives necessary to be successful. In other words, stop and think about who you need and what they will contribute.

This primmer is approached from the perspective of a higher education observer, the field in which our firm works primarily. It may also directly relate to business and other environments where individuals with different perspectives interact and express opinions on matters they find important.

Equity: It is reasonable to expect that fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all is a fundamental expectation while we continually strive to identify and eliminate hurtles that have prevented the full participation of some groups in society. The principle of equity attests to the fact that we have historically under-served and under-represented certain groups. Therefore decency in acknowledging this and taking proactive steps to address these unbalanced situations was [and in some cases still is] necessary in certain circumstances to jumpstart equality in the provision of opportunities to these groups, and everyone, consistently.

An example of defining equity that I have found useful is that Equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to access what they need to thrive. This requires removing obstacles to health such as poverty, discrimination, and their consequences, including: powerlessness and lack of access to well-paying jobs, quality education and housing, safe environments, and health care (Braveman et al., 2017).

Inclusion: Legitimately convening previously excluded individuals and/or groups into discussions, activities, and decision/policy making processes in a way that shares potential and ensures equal access to opportunities and resources.

George Washington University uses the term inclusion to describe the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity – in people, in the curriculum, in the co-curriculum, and in communities (e.g. intellectual, social, cultural, geographic) with which individuals might connect. [https://diversity.gwu.edu/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-online-course]

These above definitions are not exhaustive, yet hopefully provide some guidance as how to begin this conversation. Moreover, they are meant to provide a baseline and foundational awareness in the areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is also easier to embrace something when you understand it better.

Success in this DEI arena is best achieved through an open minded and active listening approach. When we see the opposite [mainly in Social Media videos], the outcome usually results in a narrow minded and narcissistic reaction that leads to what has now been termed *"Cancel Culture."* If one is actively supporting DEI and tries diligently to practice it, listening to the opinions, ideas and points-of-view of others is important, disagreeable as some may be to you. Not doing so effectively nullifies any pretense that DEI is part of your value system.

Recent Update for 2020 and Relevant Public Discussion on Cancel Culture: The US Department of Education recently hosted a webinar, *Confronting a Culture of Censorship on Campus* highlighting how the DEI community in traditional higher education can lose effectiveness and have an opposite impact on policy and public opinion at large. It is worth viewing: https://edstream.ed.gov/webcast/Play/03d329cfbe 5241e2a9cf62c82dd873561d

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