

**Implementing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives to Improve Leadership, Access,  
and Accountability in Higher Education: A Literature Review**

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### **Abstract**

Higher education organizations are complex institutions with complicated and multifaceted goals, a variety of stakeholders, and continued societal pressure to become agents of change. Higher education organizations and leaders need to determine who has access to higher education, how they are promoting and encouraging access, and what can be done *beyond* access. Access, while important, is not enough to create a diverse and equitable environment. Higher education institutions should be exploring how to expand their accessibility and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. If these organizations are not fulfilling DEI and access goals, then stakeholders should be asking why and determining if this is a failure of leadership, policy, or something else entirely. Culture, community building, and encouraging access and equity all factor into higher education organizations, but strategic plans and mission statements are not sufficient when considering accessibility and success rates. There needs to be support within leadership and organizational culture, and a dedication to supporting a diverse student body through DEI initiatives. Reviewing relevant research and materials in a narrative literature review highlights the importance of access, equity, and accountability and also suggests institutional leadership and culture play a vital role in determining success with these essential shifts.

*Keywords:* higher education, access, diversity, social justice, leadership, accountability

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Higher education organizations are complex institutions with complicated and multifaceted goals, a variety of stakeholders, and continued societal pressure to become agents of change. Higher education organizations and leaders need to determine who has access to higher education, how they are promoting and encouraging access, and what can be done *beyond* access. Access, while important, is not enough to create a diverse and equitable environment. Higher education institutions should be exploring how to expand their accessibility to a wide array of students, in addition to increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. If these organizations are not fulfilling DEI and access goals, then we should be asking why and determining if this is a failure of leadership, policy, or something else entirely.

Culture, community building, and encouraging access, diversity, and equity all factor into higher education organizations. In higher education, “excellence and accessibility...are not only compatible, they are synergistic” (Crow & Dabars, 2020, p. 72). Education must be accessible in order for excellence to occur, and things like community building and organizational culture contribute. Although it seems obvious, “by excluding huge proportions of the population, the nation excludes the experience, ideas, intelligence, and ambition of those millions.” (Crow & Dabars, 2020, p. 72).

Reviewing relevant research and materials in a narrative literature review highlights the importance of access, equity, and accountability and also suggests institutional leadership and environmental culture play a vital role in determining success with these essential shifts. Utilizing both symbolic and post-modern perspectives as outlined by Hatch (2018) while exploring higher education organizations places value on the importance of individual stories of

educators (Pawel, 2021; Dhar, 2021) while also allowing space for questions about equity, access, and the weight of those decisions.

### **Higher Education Institutions as Organizations**

The first step to improving higher education accessibility and equity is understanding that these institutions are complex organizations with detailed paradigms and beliefs tied into their missions and principles. Paradigms, according to Hatch (2018), are worldviews that shape how an organization makes decisions and conceptualizes their values. In other words, all organizations are “defined by their paradigms, that is, the prevalent view of reality shared by members of the organizations” (Simsek & Louis, 1994, p. 671). This is important to remember since “a particular dominant paradigm, structure, strategy, culture, leadership, and individual role accomplishments are defined by this prevailing world view” (Simsek & Louis, 1994, p. 671). In response to the current demand for diverse and racially inclusive learning, higher education organizations are working to inspire a paradigm and culture shift. This can be a difficult concept as organizational culture is often deeply ingrained in the leadership, policies, and goals of an institution.

### **Organizational Culture**

Organizational culture plays a central role in determining paradigms and leadership, which in turn influences how higher education institutions prioritize what needs to be done for the organization to be successful, as well as what success means. Organizations are “socially constructed phenomena” and “organizational members (including administrators) should be sensitive to the importance of understanding organizations as contextually based systems of meaning” (Simsek & Louis, 1994, p. 690). The actions of individuals within an organization will impact both the organization itself and the other members. Successful organizations often have a

shared vision, or a unifying idea of what they hope to achieve and how they hope to achieve it (Fillion et al., 2015; Caldwell, 2012).

The shared vision is made up of whatever values the organization deem important, often dictated by “social principles, goals, and standards that members of a culture believe have intrinsic worth” (Hatch, 2018, p. 206). With a shared vision or core values in place, higher education organizations can create a more efficient institution since these values “define what cultural members care about most and help them determine their priorities,” which is often related to why someone chooses to be involved with an organization (Hatch, 2018, p. 206). This sometimes takes the form of mission statements or strategic plans, giving the organization a guide by which to make decisions.

In addition to the influence of individuals within an organization, there is pressure from community stakeholders. Inviting community feedback “brings a diverse group of people together with a set of common goals. It is based on the ideals of commitment and shared responsibility” (Griggs & Stewart, 1996). Organizational culture, combined with community building, encourages higher education to expand their worldview beyond the physical borders of their institution. Community building adds to the diverse culture and unites people with a common goal. Part of the growing call for equity and access is encouraged by community stakeholders who want to see their local institutions more representative of the surrounding area. This is a necessary influence on higher education institutions as “the knowledge structure is more likely to respond to changes in the external environment” (Simsek & Louis, 1994, p. 674). The world outside of education is rapidly changing in many ways, and higher education organizations, often pushed toward reform by community members, need to adjust their paradigms to reflect that. As the cultural values change, so too should the policies.

### **Leadership Challenges**

Organizational culture is not easy to adjust. Values and missions are often deeply rooted in personal beliefs and convictions. Higher education in the United States in particular “functions much more like a network, and it is naturally resistant to top-down reform” (Ris, 2018, p. 14). Because of this, it can be difficult for leaders to encourage vast paradigm shifts within their institution. However, this simply means that it is even more important for leadership to have strong convictions and beliefs in how they are shaping an organization. Rather than continuing to have a traditional mindset about how an organization *should* run, new structures for organizational learning idealize how an organization *could* run (Fillion et al., 2015; Caldwell, 2012). That often involves renegotiating the culture of the institution and examining where there is room for improvement.

Organizations, particularly within higher education, do not have the option to ignore diversity and cultural shifts. Although it will be difficult, the “effective academic leader of the future must negotiate the multicultural environment by fully recognizing diversity and difference while exercising leadership that unites towards a common goal” (Eddy, 1997). This is where community building and community outreach can help higher education institutions determine how to best serve the community and their students. Bringing all stakeholders to the table will help support key features of leadership including “the engagement of persons in a process that identifies them with goals” and “the potential to change the institutional environment (e.g. values, beliefs, etc.) by implementing diversity goals into the organizational culture” (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002, p. 55). Particularly when it comes to improving the accessibility, diversity, and equity within higher education, leaders must be willing to bring new and creative ideas to the table, and support the necessary cultural and paradigm shifts.

### **Higher Education Goals**

It is difficult to narrow down the goals of all higher education organizations; there are too many variables within each institution including what majors they offer, which population of students they serve, where they are located, who is funding them, among other concerns. At the most basic level, some of the most important aspects of higher education institutions are accepting, educating, and matriculating students (Crow & Dabars). This puts a strain on institutions to compete for resources, the most obvious being students (Jack, 2019).

However, there is currently a growing movement to highlight a student-centered and inclusive approach to education. Within this, higher education is “shifting away from standardization and control and toward a more holistic, student-centered understanding of college education” (Ris, 2018, p. 13). Connecting back to leadership structures within higher education, leaders need to “implement new strategies that maximize the educational benefits of diversity in higher education institutions, which in turn allow students of all races to fuel the nation’s economy and shape the social system” (Karkouti, 2016, p. 405). This means expanding the resource pool to consider students who are not always as academically or financially prepared for college (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2016).

Not only does this often align actions with the missions and values of higher education institutions, but it also benefits the college, the students, and the community. The overly competitive higher education challenges the presentation of these institutions as a force for change and improvement (Jack, 2019). These divisions contribute to the systemic challenges facing largely minority communities and go against the missions and values of many higher education institutions. The need for access, diversity, equity, and inclusion encourages the idea “that all children do have worth and that their capabilities should be valued” (Sher & King, 2015,

p. 252).

### **The Importance of Access (as a Starting Point)**

While it seems obvious, the first major challenge for many students pursuing higher education is access. Many student are lacking the necessary resources to even apply to college institutions, let alone attend, finance, and persist in their education (Jack, 2019). While the culture shift and leadership buy-in is absolutely necessary, there need to be tangible, measurable action steps to combat inequality and remove barriers for success. This includes identifying said barriers as well as implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion policies to assist in removing or mediating them. Crow and Dabars (2020) suggest:

Although some selective schools go to great lengths to recruit socioeconomically disadvantaged students, the fact remains that the scale of such efforts is negligible and admission to these elite institutions is most strongly predicted by students' socioeconomic status – as captured by zip code—than by any assessment of their future potential. (p. 71)

Often, higher education institutions will accept a select number of students from a minority background as false representation of their commitment to diversity. However, if colleges are not recruiting students because of an institutional belief that they can succeed, it is disingenuous at best, if not actively harmful. As Jack (2019) states in *The Privileged Poor*, “Diversity should not be celebrated the day a college publishes its admissions statistics only to be put on the back burner once the next crop of students arrives on campus” (p. 182).

### **Barriers for Success**

Although there are students from all backgrounds who face unexpected challenges in higher education, there are often more barriers for students who are members of a minority or



protected class. Often times, students from a lower socio-economic level are tasked with working while attending classes, taking care of family members, or dealing with unreliable housing or transportation (Jack, 2019). This places them at a disadvantage before even entering the classroom and is only exacerbated by “high-volume task-based assignments that were intended to scaffold student learning” (Ballysingh, 2017, p. 19). When instructors or institutions expect only the traditional student to attend their courses, they often place unrealistic expectations or pressures on the students who are balancing other obligations. In this way, while students from a diverse background might technically have access to higher education, it is still an inequitable system.

While higher education institutions might adjust their leadership and organizational expectations, there are deep rooted inequalities to contend with. For example, “Race, social class and gender stratification are three of the most enduring sources of social inequality in American society” which has been reflected in higher education (Southworth & Mickelson, 2007, p. 497). All of these challenges present themselves as barriers for success, both at an academic level and a personal level (Jack, 2019). Higher education organizations should seek out programs that can educate faculty and staff on the importance of diversity policies and how they can benefit their institution (Karkouti, 2016; Wilson-Strydom, 2015).

These barriers for success are often carried into careers in higher education as well, with minority faculty and staff being tasked with educating students on areas of race, diversity, and equity (Pawel, 2021; Dhar, 2021). These instructors are often the sole driving force for an increase in access and diversity, which puts an unnecessary burden on them as individuals, particularly if they do not have the institutional support. Dhar (2021) explains that, as a minority instructor, they “have never had the option of *not* teaching race” (p. 62). A higher education

organization not having access to quality educators of diverse backgrounds perpetuates inequality in education, both for students and faculty. Evidence shows that a school's "racial composition is correlated with access to high-quality, credentialed teachers instructing in their area of expertise" (Southworth & Mickelson, 2007, p. 501). Not advocating for access to diverse and inclusive education is a clear barrier for success.

### **DEI: A Paradigm Shift**

Diversity, equity, and inclusion policies are a direct response to inequality and, when implemented by strong leaders and supported by a paradigm shift in the organizational culture, these actions can have beneficial and long lasting implications for students. This shift begins at the very ground level of a higher education organization including developing "new admissions and hiring policies that promote an equal representation of socially oppressed groups" to create a diverse climate (Karkouti, 2016, p. 408). Implementing diversity goals that are connected to a shift in organizational culture will showcase the higher education institutions dedication to a positive change in DEI policies. Leadership and stakeholders will be able to highlight the "culture, values, and beliefs in the institutional environment [that] are targeted for change" (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002, p. 55). In this manner, DEI and accessibility movements are brought to the forefront of policy shifts in order to improve student success and meet the overall goals of the organization.

One way to support the higher education shift toward DEI initiatives, is introducing diverse classrooms as early as possible in education. Studies have shown that students who have a diverse and supportive experience in high school are more likely to pursue a college education. Southworth & Mickelson (2007) found that the "greater the inclusiveness of the school, the greater the students' opportunities to enroll in higher tracks" (p. 504). Along the same lines,

Karkouti (2016) explains that “racially and ethnically inclusive learning environments positively impact students’ learning and prepare them to be contributing members of society through exposing them to new ideas and perspectives” (p. 407). In other words, coming from an already diverse environment provides students a better baseline for success later on. At the very least, students should be provided a diverse and supportive classroom when they first enter college, regardless of where they attend, what type of degree they are seeking, or what their background is. DEI policies have the “potential to transform the institutional culture and pedagogical practices in higher education” (Aguirre & Martinez, 2002, p. 55).

### **Necessary Steps Moving Forward**

As suggested by the literature, there is no single policy or procedure alone that can create ideal higher education leadership, organizational culture, access to education, or diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies. However, higher education organizations are quickly becoming “opportunity engines for a growing number of Americans” and so there needs to be an effort to move forward (Ballysingh, 2017, p. 6). There are innumerable strategic plans, mission statements, and leadership overhauls that take place in organizations, but one of the most valuable things that can be done is to take note of what policies help students succeed and what policies undermine student access, take note of who is developing these policies and why, and then hold them accountable. Higher education institutions should be open to feedback from both their employees and students who are on the frontline of many DEI initiatives.

### **Accountability**

Organizational leadership and culture influence innumerable decisions within higher education institutions. Because of this, leaders and policy makers should be held accountable for the overall impact of decisions, particularly when it comes to access and DEI initiatives.

Importantly, leaders and those in positions of power should be focused on making ethical choices that best serve their stakeholders (Karkouti, 2016; Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2016). In the same way, leadership in higher education institutions should “represent an unparalleled excellence in comprehension, creativity, and compassion. Leadership should embody the ability to inspire others to believe in an achieve a worthy goal” (Karkouti, 2016, p. 411).

It is not enough for diverse students to simply have access to higher education because “increasing equity in terms of numbers participating is not sufficient if the education experience of students does not enable success” (Wilson-Strydom, 2015, p. 152). Strategic plans and mission statements cannot stand on their own, independent from organizational outcome; the goals outlined on paper need to match up with the actions of the institution. If they do not, then the organization should reevaluate their values, beliefs, and missions to make sure they are in alignment and be held accountable (Brown, 2017).

### **Why it Matters**

The literature supports the idea that higher education organizations should be developing pro-active intervention mechanisms to support all students, “such as outreach programs, non-discrimination policies, financial and housing support, [and] flexible study path options” (Veidemane et al., 2021, p. 48). Higher education is an avenue that should be available and accessible for all students, regardless of their diverse backgrounds, and the various articles and authors showcase that equity and accessibility are vital components of educational organizations. Crow and Dabars (2020) summarize the importance of access, success, and support when they write:

Equity and excellence are complementary because talent is distributed throughout the socioeconomic spectrum; national competitiveness in educational attainment depends on

extending opportunities to sufficient numbers from all demographic strata; diversity enhances the quality of the educational experience; and the success of the nation's democracy depends on an educated citizenry. (p. 72)

As previously stated, higher education institutions are complex, but so too are the individuals who attend and support these higher education institutions. While there are necessary discussions surrounding who has access to higher education and who does not, accessibility is not the only factor to consider. There needs to be support within the leadership and organizational culture, and a dedication to supporting a diverse student body through DEI initiatives. Jack (2019) summarizes best what needs to be done moving forward: "Diversity must be continuously cultivated. The elite college must change, adapt, and grow right along with its changing student body" (p. 182).

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