

Racial Equity and Justice in Educational Settings

by Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher, OCCRL Director

Colleges and universities nationwide have been in the news as student demands from racially minoritized students, particularly black students and their accomplices, have gone viral via social media. The current generation of black student activists is calling for direct actions, tangible outcomes, and greater institutional accountability for creating and sustaining campus environments that are more diverse and inclusive. Incidents of racial microaggressions against minoritized faculty, staff, and students continue despite pledges to increase the numbers of faculty, staff, and students of color; sizable commitment of dollars; and notable gains in the racial and ethnic diversity of certain parts of campus. Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, a professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University, is a scholar, educator, and activist focused on empowering and imagining futures that sustain and cultivate learning, growth, and success of marginalized groups in the U.S. higher education institutions. In August, Dr. Stewart will serve as Professor in the School of Education and Co-Director of the Student Affairs in Higher Education Program at Colorado State University. Her research and activism calls attention to the gap between focusing attention on compositional diversity and actually doing the work necessary to drive institutional transformation toward greater racial justice. Dr. Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher interviewed Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart, a professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at Bowling Green State University. The summary below highlights this interview; the full interview is available as the debut episode of the [Democracy's College](#) podcast series.



Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart

In the face of ongoing aggressions, micro and macro against racialized minorities on university college campuses, what do you find is the role of faculty, staff, and student activists in response to racial inequities?

Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart: I think they play critical roles in bringing awareness to what the issues are that are of particular concern and that are hindering progress towards greater racial equity and justice in our colleges and universities. I think that is probably the first critical role they play. I think secondly, beyond awareness, they are also contributing to putting the pressure on, provoking attention and actual change to take place. You know, so that it is not just a matter of bringing awareness but continuing to apply pressure. I think the third role that faculty, staff, and student activism can play in response to racial inequities on campus is actually being able to provide a vision of how things could be different. What could that change look like? What must it look like? And to play a role at the table as those decisions are made that will actually lead to greater institutional transformation.


About twice a generation, there are calls that come forward from faculty, staff, and students from racially minoritized groups to make demands at their institutions, over and over again, requests for more faculty and staff of color and students of color. The need for faculty and staff of color to successfully advance through tenure and promotion and to advance into senior-level administrative roles. The need for greater financial resources to support students of color to enroll and to stay at the institution. Training for majority, racially majoritized faculty on how to deal effectively and appropriately with issues of equity and inclusion in the classroom, hostile campus climates, and incidents of micro-aggressions. Campus counseling center staff who are actually competent in addressing racial battle fatigue and racial trauma.

All of these issues, and of course the multiple identities of students of color and dealing with the intersecting oppressions they face on campus in terms of sexuality and gender, social class, and disability as well. In those ways, within the higher education context, those issues can take on particular nuances and concerns because of the very different ways and the wide variety and diversity of ways that students and people become involved in higher education. So different from, let's say, the P-12 sector, our primary and secondary sector, where there is mandatory education where students have to go to school. So in some ways schools have to find ways to deal equitably with students in the classroom, or at least they have to recognize that they are going to have difference and diversity within the classroom. That is not necessarily a presumed situation at all colleges and universities. When we move to the postsecondary level it shifts and institutions have much more. . . we could say autonomy and choice in how they shape their classes, incoming classes. How they shape the faculty and staff that are working with those students. That greater degree of autonomy in postsecondary education I think adds some additional layer of nuance and complexity to how these issues show up and how they are dealt with at that level.

What is the variation or contrast, if you will, between what diversity looks like and what equity is, what social justice is, and what inclusion entails?

Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart: To cover the gap between compositional diversity—who is in the room—and institutional transformation we need to do more than just center on diversity and inclusion. We must really move forward to amplify efforts to promote equity and justice. Diversity and inclusion are not terms that are actually related inherently to equity and justice. One of the issues with it is that we see higher education institutions taking what I call a Kool-Aid approach to addressing the deep systemic and structural issues that have resulted in racial injustice and inequity in our colleges and universities. For too long we've centered on the goal of achieving a critical mass of racially minoritized constituents as the best reflection of campus progress. Where White, cis-gendered, heterosexual, Christian, temporally able-bodied, and middle- and upper-class people are the water and the minoritized people are the cherry Kool-Aid mix, as it were. We merely have poured the contents of this cherry-flavored pouch into the existing water and stirred and hoped it would be enough to produce sustainable change. And that clearly has not been effective and has not been the case. And so I argue that it is time for colleges and universities to stop trying to make Kool-Aid for the picnic already in progress, that we really need to pay attention to how to move beyond merely counting who's in room, to actually examine how our institutional norms, practices, and systems continue to reproduce conditions that frustrate efforts to achieve equity and diversity.

The different ways that these concepts approach the issues is important.

Diversity asks	<p>Who is in the room? How many more of x group do we have this year than last year? Is it separatist to provide funding for ethnic student centers?</p>	
Inclusion asks	<p>Have everyone's ideas been heard? Is this environment safe for everyone to feel like they belong? Wouldn't it be great to have a program with a panel that debates Black Lives Matter as a movement?</p>	
Equity asks	<p>Who is trying to get into the room but cannot? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure? What conditions have we created that maintain certain groups as a perpetual majority here? What are people experiencing on campus that they do not feel safe when isolated and separated from others like themselves?</p>	
Justice asks	<p>Whose ideas will not be taken as seriously because they are not in the majority? Whose safety is being sacrificed and minimized to allow others to be comfortable in maintaining their dehumanizing views? Why would we allow the humanity and dignity of a group of people to be the subject of a debate in the first place?</p>	

In these ways, diversity celebrates increases in numbers that still reflect minoritized positions and incremental growth, whereas equity celebrates reductions in harm, revisions to abusive systems, and increases in support for peoples' lives and life chances as reported by those who have been targeted. Inclusion celebrates awards for initiative and credits itself for having an ethnically diverse candidate pool, but justice celebrates getting rid of practices and policies that were having disparate impacts on minoritized groups in the first place. That too is the difference.

Diversity and inclusion were never meant to produce equity and justice. Those concepts and constructs really represent merely evolutionary changes that do little to actually change the essence of an organization and how it operates, whereas equity and justice represent revolutionary change that is designed to dismantle in order to rebuild. And so, I believe that if our colleges and universities are going to make a difference in issues of equity and justice we need to embrace revolution, not merely evolution.

What tangible corrective actions can leaders take to initiate the work that you discussed in moving beyond just compositional diversity to cultivating learning environments that actively counter the marginalization of racialized minorities and other minoritized groups?

Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart: It is not enough to recruit more racially minoritized faculty. One also needs to be examining reappointment, tenure and promotion systems, and hostile and toxic department cultures that create a revolving door. And in that revolving door, when racialized minoritized faculty are constantly moving in and out every three to four years, it destabilizes community-building efforts and isolates tokenized faculty that manage to make it through. It is not just the recruitment; it is really examining the systems and structures that support retention.

It is not enough to do annual training on using inclusive language in the classroom, for instance, if we never really take to heart efforts to call out and disrupt faculty assumptions of the presumed incompetence of racially minoritized students in their classroom. If the faculty are still assigning readings that reinforce normative assumptions that bolster Whiteness and White supremacy. If the faculty are not taught to recognize and disrupt the creation of study and project groups that often students are allowed to do on their own, but they tend to do so in ways that ostracize marginalized and exclude racially minoritized students. We also have to think about how we can hold faculty accountable as part of the departments' and colleges' advancement systems for how they are actively contributing or failing to contribute to creating just and sustainable classroom environments.

It is moving beyond merely bringing people in the door, and again, what are the things that are underneath that, and really thinking about systemic and structural change. Many changes institutions boast about receiving diversity initiative that celebrates diversity or got students involved in celebrating difference and what that means, but this is often absent of any concrete assessment of the sustained impact of those initiatives. Those things need to be happening. We can't just recruit students if we are not examining and making structural changes to disrupt and revolutionize the classroom climate, the residence hall environments that often are hostile and toxic to minoritized groups. Those are the kind of things that I think are tangible, actionable, corrective actions that leadership can take on campuses.

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Is there an additional call to action that you would like to issue to those who want to take a more active role in advocating for racial justice?

Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart: I would encourage people to first do the self-work, the interior work, necessary to learn about and unlearn the internalized dominance or internalized oppression that all of us have been socialized into in this country. That kind of self-work is essential to actually being positively effective in impacting change in our campuses. I will also encourage folks to actively seek to build coalitions with others who are also members of minoritized populations on campus. We will gain more by working together than by working separately, recognizing that our futures are really bound up together with each other. We don't need to compete; we can actually work collaboratively in coalitions to achieve gains that will improve the life chances and educational experiences of everybody on campus, not just one group at a time.

Hear more insights from Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart by listening to the [full interview](#). Also, readers are encouraged to watch [Minding the Gap: The Distance Between Compositional Diversity and Institutional Transformation](#), Dr. Dafina-Lazarus Stewart's lecture given at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, as part of the Dean's Diversity Lecture Series sponsored by the College of Education, Office of the Provost, and OCCRL.

*Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher may be reached at ezamanig@illinois.edu.
Dafina-Lazarus Stewart may be reached at dafinas@bgsu.edu.*