



DEI AS A TRANSFORMATIONAL CATALYST FOR HIGHER EDUCATION AND PUBLIC GOOD

Michelle Claville, Ph.D.

Higher education is considered a public good when it is accessible to all members of the public without compromise of quality. The United States has committed to this goal through initiatives like the GI Bill, Pell Grants, Affirmative Action, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. This article explores the role of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), the only non-governmental agency in the US that provides recognition for accrediting agencies, in supporting the transformation of higher education into a true public good by commitment to DEI.

Commentators suggest that higher education is a theoretical public good — a vision that could be realized with intentional efforts to address the barriers hindering its true potential. Drozdowski (2022) argues that in the earlier history of the United States, higher education was more of a public good due to low cost with scholarships for low-income students. It was non-excludable to the “public” (i.e., only white, wealthy males) at that time, and non-rivalrous, (i.e., one person’s use didn’t deplete it or prevent others from accessing it).

As women and racialized minorities entered campuses en masse, higher education transitioned from a “public” to a private good. State-level funding for campuses declined precipitously by the 1980s while federal dollars became more privatized as student loans. That perspective shift continued, primarily benefiting individuals rather than society at large. Despite recent efforts to include historically disenfranchised groups in higher education, a truly non-excludable and non-rivalrous system remains a mere vision. Nevertheless, proponents for quality higher education remain determined to implement the changes needed to realize the vision.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation is dedicated to supporting the realization of this vision for higher education through advocacy for, and demonstrated commitment to, DEI. Its DEI statement says:

We believe that the rich values of diversity, equity, and inclusion are inextricably linked to quality assurance in higher education. Additionally, CHEA affirms that diversity, equity, and inclusion contribute to student success and that student success contributes to a better, healthier, and more enlightened, progressive society (CHEA, 2021a).

A diverse, equitable, and inclusive higher education construct is better positioned to be both non-excludable and non-rivalrous. This is especially so as “the public” includes humans of all races, genders, belief systems, socio-economic backgrounds, ages, abilities, and more. Accordingly, CHEA’s recognition of DEI as a quality assurance factor in higher education, is a declaration that *a non-excludable and non-rivalrous higher education is a quality education.*

A BOLD NEW STANDARD

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation released its formal DEI statement in 2021. It was a time when the deaths of citizens like George Floyd and the COVID-19 pandemic, synchronously unveiled societal injustices and inequities on a very public stage, prompting the observed adrenergic response for corrective action. Responses included re-energized support for historically disenfranchised populations, hindered from achieving optimal social development. Federal agencies like the National Science Foundation (NSF) offered various supplementary support to funded researchers working in historically underserved communities. The support addressed unimaginable challenges, including limited Wi-Fi access, a hinderance to scholarship (NSF, 2022). Meanwhile, educational institutions at all levels engaged in “tough and painful conversations about systemic racism,” prompting administrators to actively diversify faculty and staff, make curricula more inclusive, and include more diverse individuals on boards and committees (Forte, 2021). Over time, higher education institutions (HEIs), corporations, organizations, and various entities issued statements affirming their commitment to DEI, justice, and belonging.

Implemented in January 2022, CHEA’s Recognition Standard 3.A. requires recognized accreditors to manifest commitment to DEI (CHEA, 2021b). The boldly innovative step responded to insightful research affirming DEI as quality enhancement to higher education. The standard spoke to all CHEA-recognized accreditors (institutional and programmatic), whether they had already implemented DEI standards for accredited institutions, or not. It also encouraged accreditors to model their commitment to DEI within their organizational constructs.

Recognition Standard 3.A. does not dictate how accreditors should manifest their commitment. It intentionally omits any formal definition of *diversity* since the construct goes beyond consideration of race to include other determinants including gender, age, disability, social status, etc. (Carleton, 2021). Rather, CHEA offers examples of suggested evidence that would manifest compliance (CHEA, 2021b). Such examples range from providing rosters of staff, board, and site review teams that reflect the diversity of institutional membership, to the inclusion of a DEI value statement in the organizations’ official mission statements. Notably, *the recognition standard does not mandate that accrediting organizations require member institutions to set DEI standards.*

Within 12 months of the effective date of Standard 3.A., CHEA released a series of recorded webinars (Jackson Hammond, 2022; Ramaswamy, 2022; Benson Clayton, 2022) that introduced the

standard then discussed DEI with respect to ethics, educational outcomes and opportunities, and impact. In addition, CHEA hosted plenary and concurrent sessions at its annual conferences in 2022 and 2023, that afforded the combined higher education and quality assurance community with opportunities to both learn and share best practices and/or concerns regarding the standard.

Many CHEA-recognized accreditors manifested a commitment to DEI before the implementation of the standard. Kelderman (2023) reports that six of the seven institutional accreditors formerly known as regional accreditors, had implemented DEI standards as early as 1994. The seventh, the Southern Association of Schools' Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), issued a "Position Statement on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion." Similarly, the Distance Education Accrediting Commission (DEAC), another institutional accreditor that focuses on distance education, issued a "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion" statement. DEAC, like other institutional accreditors, has taken the notable step of committing "to exemplifying DEI in all of its operations ..." (DEAC, n.d.).

Of the 52 CHEA-recognized programmatic accreditors, 50 (96%) have manifested commitment to DEI on their websites by way of standards, vision or mission statements, position statements, by-laws, policy statements, core values, dedicated resources, and more (CHEA, n.d. b). Like institutional accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), a few programmatic accreditors emphasize accessibility in concert with their DEI emphasis. Other accreditors focus on gender equity, social justice and/or belonging.

According to Kelderman (2023), two institutional accreditors have elected to focus on the singular construct of *equity*. More specifically, under its 2014 standards for (i) mission and academic quality, and (ii) student learning, the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC) includes an emphasis on *equity*, requiring that the 132 accredited community colleges "reflect the diverse and changing needs of its students, in support of equity in success for all students" (ACCJC, 2014). Similarly, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) charges its 155 members to "focus on equity and closure of achievement gaps" (NWCCU, 2020).

Accreditors have publicly expressed diverse reasons for manifesting a commitment to DEI, all of which point to ensuring that higher education is non-excludable and non-rivalrous. Some report rationales that respond to "...inequities existing in and endemic to higher education..." laid bare by the COVID-19 pandemic, while others respond to the demands of constituents at member institutions (Kelderman, 2023). In the case of NWCCU, after an 18-month study in 2018, the accrediting organization learned that its stakeholders wanted the commission to "stand up for all in issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion" (Bohanon, 2022).

The process of accreditation involves a diverse cross-section of society that is vested in ensuring quality in post-secondary education. If stakeholders (which may include "members of the general public, representatives from comparable institutions or programs ... or representatives from an altogether different sector of higher education" (CHEA, n.d. a)) recognize and call for support of DEI, they are advocating for post-secondary education to be non-excludable. In other words, CHEA's manifested commitment to DEI is in the public's interest and in service of public good.

DEI AND QUALITY EDUCATION

There is ample evidence from research across the academy and policymaking circles that DEI enhances quality in higher education. For instance, in her Century Foundation Report, Tsuo summarizes her review of the research literature and provides additional evidence that diversity is integral to a

quality higher education. She reports on one study that concludes "... that informal interactions with peers of other racial groups significantly enhanced and individual's learning outcomes" (Tsuo, 2015). Such enhancements include, "... improved intellectual engagement, self-motivation, citizen and cultural engagement, and academic skills like critical thinking and problem solving, and writing – for students of all races." Such advantageous effects persist long after graduation. Tsuo also reports that socioeconomic diversity is also beneficial to students, and that "... both racial and socioeconomic integration work in tandem to enhance and optimize racial diversity" (Tsou 2015).

Carleton (2021) reminds us that people have been studying diversity and its impact on higher education for years, and that diversity goes beyond consideration of race. Other diversity determinants include gender, age, disability, social status, student status (first generation, etc.), and more. She encourages higher education decision makers to consider "... how universities teach, what programs, they offer ..." and to consider the constitution of the faculty when considering diversity in the institution. Her research also shows the shifting age demographics of the "typical" college student. The diversity of student demographics demands the requisite implementation of policies that permit the manifestation of diverse perspectives, experiences, and voices, all for the purpose of ensuring optimal quality in higher education *for all*. Such policies will establish equitable frameworks customized to support students based on need and will promote innovation to accomplish the same.

The mission of CHEA is a declaration to serve society by assuring quality in higher education, nationally and internationally. It aligns with the resounding commitment to invest in the nation's human capital. Accordingly, CHEA's commitment to DEI supports colleges and universities that believe "... that diversity in their student bodies, faculties, and staff is important for ... providing a high-quality education" (ACE, 2012). Furthermore, it aligns with The U.S. Department of Education's mission which seeks "... to promote student achievement and preparation for global competitiveness (USDE, 2016).

The current age of globalization and internationalization demands quality post-secondary education to develop human capital that is transferable across cultures, races, ethnic groups, and nations. By way of *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (UN General Assembly, 2015), which serves as a "shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future" (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.), the US as one of 193 Member States of the United Nations (UN), has committed to the pursuit of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals, including the fourth which seeks to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all." Accordingly, CHEA's standard on DEI reinforces the organization's commitment to quality education while supporting the nation's commitment to the SDG.

The business case for CHEA's commitment to DEI in higher education should not be underestimated. In his 2019 report for the World Economic Forum, Vijay Eswaran, Executive Chairman of QI Group of Companies, explains that,

... diversity in the workplace is an asset for both businesses and their employees, in its capacity to foster innovation, creativity and empathy in ways that homogenous environments seldom do. Yet it takes careful nurturing and conscious orchestration to unleash the true potential of this invaluable asset. (Eswaran, 2019)

Analogously, the Boston Consulting Group (BCG) study affirmed that companies with more diverse management teams have 19% higher revenues, and those revenues are attributed to innovation

(Lorenzo, 2018). Research shows a “statistically significant correlation between diversity of management teams and overall innovation.” The noted innovation in a three-year span correlated to overall financial performance, with earnings before interest and taxes margins nine percentage points higher than companies with lesser diversity on their management teams. A quality higher education system is essential for preparing the type of highly skilled workforce that will yield the types of innovation and profits described in the study. In fact, “... the most innovative, disruptive and prosperous urban centres in the world – New York, Dubai, London and Singapore ...” have benefitted from the innovation driven by their diverse workforce (Eswaran, 2019). All named cities have a high concentration of highly-skilled immigrants, which is directly correlated to a significant level of innovation and economic performance.

HISTORIC CHALLENGES

Undoubtedly, higher education has been more responsive to diversity and inclusion measures than to those that pertain to equity. For instance, a historical review of the efforts to integrate the US higher education landscape with Blacks/African Americans reveals notable progress since the turn of the 19th century (JBHE, 2014). The landmark cases of *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954 and *Grove City College v. Bell* of 1984 are of note as the former case ruled that racial segregation in schools to be unconstitutional while the latter ruled that a private institution had to abide by anti-discriminatory laws since students receive federal financial aid (JBHE, 2014). Furthermore, in the early to mid- 20th Century, “southern states ... chose to offer African Americans scholarships to earn graduate degrees at out-of-state (northern) schools ... perhaps because southern states did not want to integrate white institutions,” (Leary, 2023). These and other notable events, have laid the foundation for access to large numbers of Blacks/African Americans and other people historically underrepresented in higher education.

Similar inequities still exist today, according to a detailed *Inside Higher Ed* report that recently exposed severe underfunding of 16 historically Black Land grant universities over the past 30 years (Knott, 2023). The federal analysis revealed that those 16 institutions were underfunded by their states by a total of \$13 billion dollars when compared to their traditionally white counterparts. This is more alarming since Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) account for a mere three percent of the nation’s colleges and universities yet enroll 10 percent of all African American students and produce almost 20% of all African American graduates (Sandra, 2022). Similarly, another report by *The Chronicles for Higher Education* (2023) discusses the persistence of inequities experienced by disabled people underrepresented among college students, faculty, and staff, despite 50 years of legislation enacted by Congress.

CURRENT EVENTS

Over the past 18 months, DEI in the U.S. higher education system has faced severe opposition. The historic decision by the nation’s Supreme Court to effectively end race-conscious admission programs at colleges and universities reversed decades of progress (Totenberg, 2023). With the introduction of over 40 anti-DEI bills that threaten initiatives, support offices, curriculum, and more, numerous US universities have dissolved their DEI offices and banned diversity statements and announced their intention to exclude race as a factor for awarding scholarships (Ax, 2023). The examples of legislated anti-DEI activity constitute a mere fraction of the bevy of ongoing activity to reverse years of progress towards higher education as national public good. legislation that opposes DEI in this way, threaten quality of the U.S. higher education construct, based on aforementioned research.

The anti-DEI/Affirmative action legislations declare that as a nation, we have arrived at the utopian space that fosters the potential in diverse people equitably, for the good of all. They refute the existing practice of privileged college admission based solely on wealth and legacy, and they disregard the intellectual aptitude of the academics who assure quality in higher education.

These legislative actions have also evoked discouragement amongst proponents for DEI in higher education while simultaneously inspiring re-commitment to fostering transformation therein (NAS-PA, 2023). Brahm (2023) reports that over 200 former heads of colleges and universities, intent on communicating the benefits of DEI in higher education, "... have joined forces as the Champions of Higher Education coalition," Similarly, a recent *Harvard Business Review* article (Opie & Washington, 2023) encourages companies to "... recommit to DEI in the Wake of the SCOTUS Decision."

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation remains committed to DEI and maintains that manifested DEI in the higher education space is a research-proven indicator of quality. The quality assurance organization continues to honor the missions of all recognized accreditors and the institutions that they represent. In so doing, CHEA does not dictate how any higher education-related entity meets any quality standard. It merely partners with members of said community to realize the vision of higher education as a public good. Furthermore, the organization recognizes the many voices of those who advocate for DEI as a quality measure to and through their affiliated accreditors.

The implementation of CHEA's Recognition Standard 3.A. cannot on its own correct the exclusions nor the prevalence of inequity in higher education. It will, however, be a constant reminder that for the U.S. to tout, pursue, and maintain a quality education construct, the nation must also tout, pursue and maintain exemplary DEI practices in all sectors that pertain to education quality.

REFERENCES

Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges. (2014). 2014 Accreditation standards. https://accjc.org/wp-content/uploads/Accreditation-Standards_-_Adopted-June-2014.pdf

American Council on Education. (2012, June). On the importance of diversity in higher education. <https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/BoardDiversityStatement-June2012.pdf>

Ax, J. (2023, September 22). *Anti-affirmative action group, emboldened by US Supreme Court, targets scholarships*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/anti-affirmative-action-group-emboldened-by-us-supreme-court-targets-2023-09-22/>

Benson Clayton, T. (2022, October 26). *Higher education, diversity and inclusion*. CHEA. <https://www.chea.org/video/higher-education-accreditation-and-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-dr-taffye-benson-clayton>

Bohanon, M. (2022, April 18). *DEI in accreditation*. INSIGHT into Diversity. <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/dei-in-accreditation/>

Brahm, N. (2023, August 21). *UNT dissolves DEI Office: South Carolina bans diversity statements, training*. INSIGHT into Diversity. <https://www.insightintodiversity.com/unt-dissolves-dei-office-south-carolina-bans-diversity-statements-training/>

Carleton, S. C. (2021, February 23). *The Importance of Diversity in Higher Education*. Northeastern University graduate programs. <https://graduate.northeastern.edu/resources/importance-diversity-higher-education/>

Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (2021a, May 3). *Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Statement*. CHEA. <https://www.chea.org/diversity-equity-and-inclusion-statement>

Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (2021b, December 3). CHEA standards and procedures for recognition. CHEA. <https://www.chea.org/chea-standards-and-procedures-recognition>.

Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (n.d. a). Review procedures and stages of accreditation. CHEA. <https://almanac.chea.org/review-procedures-and-stages-accreditation>

Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (n.d. b) CHEA-recognized programmatic accreditors manifested commitment to DEI. *Unpublished Results* Distance Education Accrediting Commission. (n.d.). Discover DEAC. <https://www.deac.org/Discover-DEAC/Heading.aspx>

Drozdowski, M. (2022, March 8). Is higher education a public or private good? *BestColleges.com*. <https://www.bestcolleges.com/news/analysis/2022/03/01/is-higher-education-a-public-or-private-good/>

Eswaran, V. (2019, April 29). The business case for diversity is now overwhelming. Here's why. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/04/business-case-for-diversity-in-the-workplace/>

Forte, D. (2021, June 14). The impact of George Floyd's murder: One year later. The Education Trust. <https://edtrust.org/the-equity-line/the-impact-of-george-floyds-murder-one-year-later/>

Jackson Hammond, C. (2022, May 10). CHEA Recognition and Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. CHEA. <https://www.chea.org/chea-podcasts-and-webinars>

Journal for Blacks in Higher Education. (2014, May 1). Key events in Black Higher Education. <https://jbhe.com/chronology/>

Kelderman, E. (2023, April 3). The new accountability. How accreditors are measuring colleges' diversity equity and inclusion efforts. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-new-accountability>

Knott, K. (2023, September 20). States underfunded Historically Black Land Grants by \$13 billion over 3 decades. *Inside Higher Ed*. https://www.insidehighered.com/news/government/2023/09/20/states-underfunded-black-land-grants-13b-over-30-years?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=68f1db193f-DNU_2021_COPY_02&utm_medium=e-mail&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-68f1db193f-236939714&mc_cid=68f1db193f&mc_eid=20adba695b

Leary, M. A. (2023, May 8). African American scholarships during the Great Depression. Bentley Historical Library. <https://bentley.umich.edu/news-events/news/scholarships/>

Lorenzo, R., Voigt, N., Tsusaka, M., Krentz, M., & Abouzahr, K. (2023, January 22). How diverse leadership teams boost innovation. BCG Global. <https://www.bcg.com/publications/2018/how-diverse-leadership-teams-boost-innovation>

Opie, T. & Washington, E. (2023, July 27). Why companies can – should – recommit to DEI in the wake of the SCOTUS decision. *Harvard Business Review*. <https://hbr.org/2023/07/why-companies-can-and-should-recommit-to-dei-in-the-wake-of-the-scotus-decision>

NASPA. (2023, May 3). Anti-DEI legislation response and resources. <https://www.naspa.org/news/anti-dei-legislation-response-and-resources>

National Science Foundation. (2022, May 16). NSF announces taking action: Covid-19 DEI challenge winners. https://www.nsf.gov/news/news_summ.jsp?cntn_id=305176&org=EDU

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. (2020). NWCCU 2020 standards. <https://nwccu.org/accreditation/standards-policies/standards/>

Ramaswamy, S. (2022, July 18). Diversity, equity and inclusion and the importance of ethics. CHEA. <https://www.chea.org/news-council-higher-education-accreditation-fall-2022>

Sandra. (2022, February 8). *The numbers don't lie: HBCUs are changing the college landscape*. UNCF. <https://uncf.org/the-latest/the-numbers-dont-lie-hbcus-are-changing-the-college-landscape#:~:text=Though%20HBCUs%20make%20up%20only,of%20all%20African%20American%20graduates>

Totenberg, N. (2023, June 29). *Supreme Court guts Affirmative Action, effectively ending race-conscious admissions*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2023/06/29/1181138066/affirmative-action-supreme-court-decision>

Tsuo, K. (2015, July 14). *Diversity for all: The importance of racial and socioeconomic diversity in higher education*. The Century Foundation. <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/diversity-for-all-the-importance-of-racial-and-socioeconomic-diversity-in-higher-education/>

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (n.d.). *The 17 goals | sustainable development*. United Nations. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>

United Nations General Assembly. (2015, October 15). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. Refworld. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/57b6e3e44.html>

US Department of Education. (2016, November). *Advancing diversity and inclusion in Higher Education*. Department of Education. <https://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/research/pubs/advancing-diversity-inclusion.pdf>



Michelle Claville is the Vice President for Research and Policy Analysis at the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), a non-profit, non-governmental agency located in Washington, D.C., that assures quality of the nation's higher education construct by undergirding accreditation and by advocacy on behalf of its institutional members.