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Building inclusive and anti-racist futures: Reimagining higher education for a world in flux

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Abstract

What skills and knowledge will “future-ready graduates” need to meet the challenges of a world in flux? How must traditional forms of education be reimagined to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population? How can we as individuals practice critical self-reflection about our own positionalities so that we can meaningfully engage in conversations across difference? This essay will examine the future of higher education through the lens of equity, inclusion, and anti-racism as a response to these questions and to demonstrate the collective responsibility we share in preparing students for an uncertain and ever-changing world.

1 Introduction

As all of us navigate the instability of the present and the uncertainty of the future, questions about the value of higher education in the 21st century are at the forefront. In discussions about preparing students for their futures, we must ask: Who is included in the future we are talking about? Whose voices and contributions will be taken into consideration, and who is or might be left out? How can we envision futures that are designed for the well-being and protection of all of us? Our students are navigating a world that is constantly changing, and many, if not all, of them are anxious about the uncertainty of their futures: What kinds of jobs and careers will be left in the wake of a global pandemic? How will technology continue to shape the idea of “work” itself? How can they talk across differences and be in solidarity with those most vulnerable to systemic violence? And how will they confront and combat planetary crises that linger ominously in the background? As we know, rapid economic and social transformation globally impacts conversations about teaching and learning within our local institutions. As educators, we must ask ourselves how we will prepare students with the skills and knowledge to meet these challenges by reimagining the purpose and possibilities of higher education itself, from the learning environment to institutional policies, practices, and culture.

2 Innovative teaching, creative solutions

In an era where the answers to many of our questions can be found through a quick Google search, higher education needs to revitalize how it educates students, moving away from passive learning through traditional teaching methods to designing opportunities for students to collaborate and develop creative solutions to complex problems. In fact, a report from the Chronicle of Higher Education notes that 8 out of 10 traditionally-aged college students, members of Generation Z, use YouTube as one of their primary means of learning new

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information and skills². What, then, is the purpose of higher education in the 21st century? As scholars such as Cathy Davidson (2017), Bryan Dewsbury (2019), and Joseph Auon (2017) have suggested, part of the answer lies in what makes us human to begin with: those skills that machines will not be able to easily replicate, if at all. While some college classrooms still operate from the outdated “banking model” of education – where a faculty member seeks to transmit knowledge to their students – others intentionally provide students with rich opportunities to grow the human-centered skills they will rely on as “future-ready” graduates. These classroom spaces are abuzz with students problem-solving through structured teamwork, developing applications to address social issues they are passionate about, and speaking as experts about their own communities and cultures. What steps can we take to ensure that all of our classroom spaces, and institutions, are helping students develop the skills they need to work across differences in order to imagine creative solutions to the world’s most pressing problems?

3 Equitable and inclusive cultures

We must begin by acknowledging the histories of oppression that uphold our institutions and the practice of education. Who were our institutions designed to educate? What are the underlying cultural norms and expectations that guide not only the classroom experience but also the hidden curriculum – the unspoken or informal aspects of education – that students must navigate? To prepare “future-ready graduates”, we must examine higher education through the lens of equity and inclusion: the global-scale problems that will define the remainder of the 21st century require the creative and collaborative energy not just of the few who can make it through the often convoluted landscape of higher education, but of every single student. Equity is a process that requires taking students’ diverse needs into consideration, alongside histories of oppression and disenfranchisement, in order to distribute resources and create opportunities for learning accordingly. Not all students need the same things in order to thrive during their college experience. As educators, our goal should be to identify disparate needs in order to provide the necessary support for all students to engage in meaningful learning. To build inclusive cultures, we need to intentionally create a sense of belonging for people of all identities, especially those who have been historically excluded. Often, inclusion requires examining students’ motivations for entering college in the first place instead of assuming they are there for the reasons we may imagine. Part of our obligation to the students we have in our classrooms is to equip them with the tools and resources to connect with community members, organizations, and each other so that they can face the challenges presented to them in holistic and equitable ways.

4 Anti-racist frameworks

While most, if not all, institutions espouse values of equity and inclusion through diversity statements and initiatives, when we look closer we often recognize that institutional cultures have a long way to go in confronting legacies of oppression and creating inclusive and anti-racist spaces for all. To intentionally create these environments, we have to think systemically. Systemic thinking requires examining the policies and practices that define an institutional culture through a lens of anti-racism. As Ibram Kendi writes,

One endorses either the idea of a racial hierarchy as a racist, or racial equality as an antiracist. One either believes problems are rooted in groups of people, as a racist, or locates the roots of problems in power and policies, as an antiracist. One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. (2019, p.9)

² Jeffrey Selingo, “The New Generation of Students: How Colleges Can Recruit, Teach, and Serve Gen Z”, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2018): 23.

The current narrative about student success relies on detrimental beliefs about individual students being fully responsible for navigating their way through institutions of higher learning, when often their success is impeded by policies and practices that in and of themselves uphold dominant, heteronormative, and individualistic ways of being in the world.

Similarly, many higher education institutions adhere to the belief that the “life of the mind” is the life worth cultivating throughout a college education. Our minds, however, are not separate from our lived experiences. Derald Wing Sue, in his book *Race Talk*, examines the distinction between empirical and experiential reality when he writes,

Most professors and many teachers conduct their classes...in a manner that values sterile decorum in which topics of race, gender, and sexual orientation are discussed in a highly intellectualized fashion...this feature of the academic protocol evaluates and judges the legitimacy of classroom information and learning through empirical evidence rather than experiential evidence. (2015, p.66)

When students, and faculty, are asked to leave the rest of their lives outside of the institution, the message that is perpetuated is that some forms of knowledge are more highly valued than others. But when it comes to “future-ready graduates” and the future of higher education, we know that empirical evidence only allows for limited responses and solutions to world-scale problems.

5 Human-centered skills for the future

Research on automation and the future of work argues that there are key human-centered skills that machines won't be able to replace. Among them are: creativity, imagination, curiosity, divergent thinking, and judgment. To cultivate and operationalize these skills, we must create the conditions for students to center their experiential reality and different areas of expertise. We must also prioritize collaboration and consensus-building across diverse perspectives. To teach the skills of divergent thinking – a form of thinking where many possible solutions are entertained at the same time – we must also equip students with an anti-racist framework and lens. With this lens, students will be able to ask: How do we bring a lens of environmental justice to the forefront when thinking through planetary crisis? How do our biases shape technologies? What does it mean to be a global citizen? What are our responsibilities to each other? In order to teach our students how to ask and engage in these questions, however, we must first ask them of ourselves: How can we as individuals practice critical self-reflection about our own positionalities so that we can meaningfully engage in conversations across difference?

6 Conclusions: Sharing responsibility

No matter our role within our institutions, we have the power to influence change. As bell hooks reminds us, “As a classroom community, our capacity to generate excitement is deeply affected by our interest in one another, in hearing one another's voices, in recognizing one another's presence” (1994, p.8). Our classrooms, and institutions, should be spaces of excitement, transformation, and empowerment. Each of us shares the responsibility of preparing students for an uncertain and ever-changing world, from course level changes that contribute to an inclusive teaching practice, to examining the biases that lay at the foundation of disciplines, to moving beyond institutional norms that privilege dominant behaviors and ways of being and thinking. “In our world,” Audre Lorde insists, “divide and conquer must become define and empower” (1984, p.112). We must be able to define, or name, barriers to anti-racist and inclusive institutional cultures in order to dismantle them. Centering all students' lived experiences, assets, and anxieties will enable us to confront historic inequities and ensure more inclusive futures for all.

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