

From Diversity to Dignity: Overcoming Polarization in an Age of Division

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Abstract: This article promotes closer rhetorical analysis of the current trend in higher education to institutionalize equity, inclusion, diversity, and access (EIDA) work without routinely interrogating the orienting terms used in such efforts. It may be easy to mistake the intentions of EIDA work as determining its value, thus discouraging a critical examination of the rhetorical outcomes it produces and the rhetorical effects it invites. We suggest that one insight such analysis could offer is a better account of the rhetorical constraints of the term “diversity.” In this article, we review a range of compelling critiques that have been offered of the limitations of “diversity” as it appears in higher education discourse. We suggest “dignity” as a promising alternative to “diversity” as an alternate orienting term for EIDA work in higher education.

Keywords: Access, Civic Pedagogy, Dignity, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Polarization, Rhetorical Culture

In contrast to the logic of remedying racial disadvantage, which relies on a structural explanation of racial exclusion, the logic of diversity provides a cultural explanation of inclusion. Rather than emphasizing the imperative of social justice, diversity discourse and many diversity programs stress the instrumental benefits of racial identity and of interpersonal interaction along racial and other lines. And rather than prioritizing only the needs of racial minority students, diversity discourse and initiatives often incorporate, represent, and even cater to white students.

—Ellen Berrey, “Why Diversity Became Orthodox in Higher Education

Introduction: Institutions and Inclusions

Polarization has become the anticipated state of affairs on college campuses and in the broader public culture in recent years. Although not attributable solely to the 2016 presidential campaign and subsequent erosion of the rhetorical norms of democratic politics, the presence and effects of polarization have in the years since been more widely recognized and interrogated by campus and public communities alike. Campuses have long played host to protests and demonstrations by politically active students. Recent controversies—for example, the Trump administration’s restrictive bans on immigration, the ongoing violence of White Americans and police against racial minorities, the attempt to overthrow the certification of the 2020 presidential election and the January 6, 2021 attack on the United States Capitol, and the COVID-19 pandemic—have solidified the role that institutions of higher education play in staging the conflicts of broader political polarization. These controversies have made even more visible the ways in which organizations that uphold the ideology of White supremacy and rely on numerous types of misinformation have been constitutive of an even larger rift between political parties (making bipartisan politics almost impossible) in the United States. In response, many within the higher education community have accelerated their efforts to address and resolve this rift through academic study and pedagogical innovation.

Consequently, we as both a nation and a scholarly community have had to grapple with bridging the gap between racial inequality and inequity on the one hand and efforts to promote inclusion and diversity on the other. Corporations, athletics, churches, organizations, and universities are all attempting to locate and define best practices, strategies, and objectives that engage in practices of diversity, equity, and inclusion work (DEI; more recently named equity, inclusion, diversity, and access, or EIDA).¹ Initiatives to institutionalize and promote EIDA pervade contemporary corporate and academic culture. As such, we see increasing instances of organizations establishing offices, directors, committees, and taskforces doing EIDA work, including at colleges and universities, to specifically address their history of inequity, racism, and anti-Blackness since the rise in protests over excessive policing and the renewal and resurgence of White systemic oppressive ideologies.

Although both authors agree that instituting inclusion and equity is extremely valuable and necessary in our current public culture—and we have both in fact participated widely in such efforts at our home institutions and in our professional communities—we have also come to question the utility of the term “diversity” in orienting this important work. In this essay, we argue for an enhanced notion of EIDA that is informed through our discussions of and work with EIDA issues on our respective campuses. In this essay, we propose a rethinking of the D—from (D)iversity to (D)ignity—as a pedagogical approach we use in our two different responsibilities at our universities. Hence, we wish to suggest that a more fruitful and viable concern might be to think of how “dignity” as an orienting value could lead to a more just and equitable public. To do so, we first offer a rhetorical genealogy of the term diversity, to trace the emergent and evolving meanings of the term and its subsequent critique as it is deployed more broadly in American higher education culture. Next, we each offer a reflection on how our work in EIDA has affirmed the validity of such critiques through our experiences in teaching or service at our respective institutions. Finally, we offer a discussion about the possibility of reimagining the god term diversity as the alternative organizing concept of dignity. In the end, it is our hope that by incorporating the act of dignity into our work with students, we can assess the ways our students treat each other affirmatively and supportively in their civic engagement both on campus and off campus. Our work, importantly, does not happen in the traditional classroom. Rather, both authors work on student initiatives that take place outside of the classroom—one in a center for civic engagement and the other from an office of DEI in the university president’s office.

The Emergence of Diversity Work in Higher Education

A concern with diversity seems ubiquitous today across institutions of higher education. Bonnie Urciuoli (2009) reminded us that this is not a recent development, as “discourses about *cultural diversity* have become institutionally entrenched since the 1990s” (p. 21). Although such discourses may have enjoyed relatively dominant status by the 1990s, their emergence came at least several decades earlier at institutions such as the University of Michigan where, as Ellen C. Berrey (2011) documented, administrators innovated programming “to admit and financially support racial minority students” (p. 573). The programs’ early emphasis on racially based disparities soon shifted as the discourse of diversity evolved through public circulation and uptake, producing a paradox within which “the push for diversity entails, at once, a focus on race and a shift away from race” (Berrey, p. 577). Berrey contended that pressures from legal requirements to eliminate race-based discrimination combined with shifting political and social norms embracing multiculturalism and neoliberalism broadly within American society to compel higher education institutions to prioritize diversity in relatively ambiguous

¹ For the sake of consistency, we use the acronym EIDA throughout this essay, though we recognize that different audiences are accustomed to using alternate abbreviations, such as D&I or DEI or IDEA, to refer to the ongoing efforts to infuse organizational culture, norms, and policies with the values of equity, inclusion, diversity/dignity, and access.

ways that were simultaneously motivated by the injustice of racial discrimination and capacious enough to accommodate inclusion of many different types of identities beyond race. There are both advantages and drawbacks to this approach: On the one hand, the evolution of “diversity” encourages the widespread support of privileged and elite publics by making some inclusion initiatives more palatable. On the other, what Berrey called the “diversity orthodoxy” in higher education “characterizes race in simplistic, often essentialist terms and categories, and it easily obscures the issues that people of color care about” (p. 590). When EIDA work is taken up uncritically as an unquestionably valuable pursuit for colleges and universities, opportunities to examine and refine precisely what is meant by key terms are forfeited.

For James M. Thomas, the unchallenged supremacy of “diversity” has resulted in a development comparable to Berrey’s “diversity orthodoxy.” Thomas (2020) described “diversity regimes” as “consist[ing] of the meanings and practices that institutionalize an organization’s commitment to diversity and in doing so obscure, entrench, and even intensify racial inequality” (p. 143). Much as diversity orthodoxy transforms initiatives motivated by racial injustice into inclusion efforts not limited to race, diversity regimes operate in the name of overcoming histories of exclusion and discrimination but adopt rhetorical strategies that work at counter-purposes. Thomas recognized two key strategies that are especially counterproductive for diversity work, and yet they consistently provide the backbone of diversity regimes at higher education institutions: the rhetoric of condensation and decentralization. The former radically expand the meanings of the term “diversity” to encompass every aspect of human identity and difference, conflating legally protected categories with superficial ones; the latter creates silos and competition between units pursuing EIDA work, ensuring that “inequalities become more deeply embedded and remain unchallenged” (Thomas, 2020, p. 113). As such, diversity regimes too often culminate in what Thomas called “happy talk”:

Happy talk treats diversity as something to be tolerated, or even celebrated, without considering whether and how power shapes people’s interactions with others different from themselves. As a result, happy talk obfuscates social problems associated with race and ethnicity and dismisses the continued significance of race in maintaining social inequalities (2020, p. 9).

With diversity reduced to a superficial representation of difference, campus initiatives on its behalf are hindered from achieving their aims.

Berrey, Thomas, and others have offered powerful critiques of the discourses of diversity and their constraints in higher education. Though they do not use this precise term, they are implicitly concerned with *rhetorical culture*, a concept central to the work each of us do as scholars and practitioners of rhetorical democracy and deliberation. A rhetorical culture is one in which participants “freely acknowledge the responsibility of civic discourse to unite the appearance of cultural affiliation with the plans and projects of public life” (Farrell, 1993, p. 278). Rhetorical scholars have identified the ways in which how people talk with and about each other shape the type of culture we inhabit by prompting political judgment more or less conducive to inclusion and equity. When people engage in discriminatory rhetorical practices such as scapegoating, demagoguery, and polarization, we consequently affirm political norms aligned with the logics of exclusion and discrimination (O’Gorman, 2020; Roberts-Miller, 2017). Diversity regimes and orthodoxies, we suggest, may go unchallenged because members of communities (and higher education institutions) are not always equipped to interrogate and reimagine the norms of the rhetorical cultures within which they operate. It may be easy to mistake the *intentions* of EIDA work as determining its value, thus discouraging a critical examination of the rhetorical outcomes it produces and the rhetorical effects it invites. Given the compelling critiques that have been offered of the limitations of “diversity” as it appears in higher

education discourse, we suggest it is time to explore alternate orienting terms as we continue to enhance and refine our approach to EIDA.

Faulkner et al. (2021, p. 94) argued that we should include what they have called “supportive communication” as we consider how we approach DEI work with students on our college campuses. It is generally, as Lawless has argued, that the “instance is indicative of many mainstream diversity initiatives, which co-opt calls for equity through capitalist ideologies” (Lawless, 2021, p. 179). If one considers these initiatives as neoliberal multiculturalism, or the “conservative ideology of multiculturalism that deploys a meritocratic justification, linked principally to economic benefit, to justify inequalities,” it makes sense that institutions of higher education might fail miserably in their mission to create civically engaged citizens who are aware of the importance of DEI (Darder, 2012, p. 417). As such, institutions may publicly celebrate diversity even as they fail to act or intervene into systems of oppression that are maintained through an institutional culture that reflects and produces systems of White supremacy and neoliberal capitalism. Instead, success is based on individualism, competition, and meritocracy—discourses that undermine the premise of critical multiculturalism and put an emphasis on individual human capital—a hallmark of neoliberal capitalism.

If we are to think about the different ways we engage students in EIDA work, it serves us well to reimagine what our approaches to education outside the classroom can look like. As Faulkner et al. (2021) pointed out, “because students from marginalized communities have to navigate a variety of issues beyond the classroom,” it is essential that faculty “include, welcome, and empower students by offering social support” (p. 94). Here we are envisioning a pedagogical approach that centralizes EIDA values and extends beyond traditional spaces of campus life. Where traditional notions of *diversity* might direct our assessment to the representation of various identities within the classroom, our suggested replacement of *dignity* incentivizes the construction of mutual bonds of obligation and care both within and beyond formal spaces of college instruction.

At its core, therefore, our intent in this essay is to consider the different ways in which we can begin to address EIDA work as it engages with college students and how we can do a better job at being inclusive in our work. One of those ways, as Simmons and Wahl (2016) argued, happens when one considers identity issues both in and out of the classroom when addressing who is engaging with students about EIDA concerns on their campuses. Again, it profits those of us doing this work to address issues of identity as we consider the demographic of students we are working with at our individual institutions. This includes, in our opinion, expanding the footprint of EIDA work. Indeed, if one of the outcomes we hope for is to strengthen civic engagement and civic leadership as part of our EIDA initiatives, we would do well to consider the problems thinking conventionally about these issues only in classroom could bring. If we are concerned not with performing diversity but instead with equipping students to create rhetorical cultures governed by dignity and mutual respect, then our pedagogical strategies must be designed to promote civic engagement and leadership in service of equity, inclusion, and access.

Models of Civic Engagement and Civic Leadership: Reflections on Student Impact Outside of the Classroom

As already noted, both authors not only do research and teach at our respective universities but also work in different areas of EIDA—one with the university president’s office and the other with civic engagement. For both of us, our work takes place both inside and beyond the classroom. In this section of the essay, we each describe our EIDA work and how we have designed it both to take the preceding critiques of diversity discourse into account and to develop our students’ capacity for civic engagement and civic leadership. As a kind of autoethnographic reflection, our individual discussions cannot speak for all EIDA initiatives or efforts. However, we offer the anecdotal insights we have

gained from our experiences as a resource and provocation for the continued development of civic orientations to EIDA work by other higher education leaders. We believe the work we are doing can be constitutive of a larger type of change at our universities but also as a powerful way to help students realize their potential to continue this work outside of the university.

Author 1's Reflection

Working alongside the interim assistant to the president for equity, inclusion, and diversity at my university, I have been able to see firsthand the initiatives the university wishes to set in place. These initiatives, while a concern for the former president for some time, grew more salient after Black students involved with Black Homecoming were mistreated. They were made to cancel an event due to a miscommunication, but it was the response from administration that ignited a movement at the university that went far beyond just the homecoming incident.

As students protested and began a campaign called #AntiBlackISU, the university was forced to begin thinking about how to (1) respond to student demands and (2) ensure that the initiatives of DEI addressed students' needs as well as those of staff and faculty. Black students at this university were asked to deliver a list of grievances and a list of demands to the president's office. After #AntiBlackISU made their grievances and demands known, the university responded with a report listing the different action initiatives it would create to address them. It is in the lists of grievances and demands where we can look to gain a better understanding of how students are engaged in democratic practice.

In this section I offer an analysis of the ways in which this work can be assessed, even though the work takes place outside of the classroom. In a much larger context, working with students outside of the classroom provides an even greater possibility for ensuring democratic and civic engagement. Although this issue began as a complaint about the mishandling of Black Homecoming, students quickly pivoted to include any others who ever felt some form of injustice at the university, so that they could speak up and present their grievances to the university administration. After the cancellation of Black Homecoming and with more stories of discrimination, the student demonstrations did bring about change in a number of ways, as I discuss next.

Following the demonstrations, student leaders met with administrators including the university president, dean of students, key DEI officers, and others. Their activism and engagement with DEI went beyond the meetings, however. Student leaders demanded that the administration, along with students, take part in a series of anti-Black-racism trainings conducted by an outside firm specializing in matters of DEI. Students asked that during the training, administrators and students sit together to ensure that a level of productive communication and critical thinking would take place. During the training sessions, students informed the administration of the different initiatives they felt would improve the retention rates and well-being of non-White students, staff, and faculty. To ensure retention of Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) faculty, student leaders asked for a review of hiring policies, for example. To ensure the safety of BIPOC students, student leaders asked for a survey of policing policies, as many students complained about the excessive policing done to mostly Black students on the campus. Additionally, student leaders demanded the implementation of better safety for BIPOC students living in campus housing and in the classroom. Finally, students also called for an increase in funding to get more BIPOC mental health experts on campus.

It is important to note that Black student leaders have continued to make demands throughout the health pandemic of 2020–2021. Although most of the actions enabled by #AntiBlackISU were stalled somewhat, student leaders worked with university officials to continue trainings virtually and to continue pursuing DEI initiatives. In the time since the #AntiBlackISU movement, the interim assistant to the president for equity, inclusion, and diversity has continued to promote and enact these

initiatives by creating a number of university committees and platforms that study their effectiveness.

Next, my coauthor describes the work her university is conducting along the lines of DEI initiatives. Thereafter, we return to points of assessment.

Author 2's Reflection

After participating in the Kettering Foundation's exchange for practitioners and scholars of deliberative democracy from 2015–2016, I was excited to develop resources and programming for deliberative forums on my home campus and in partnership with the broader community. These deliberative forums were modeled after the Kettering Foundation's approach to facilitating public dialogue and discussion of issues of common concern. They frequently utilize an issue guide prepared and distributed in advance of the forum that gives an overview of the issue and frames it for public discussion. The forums make use of trained facilitators who act as relatively impartial moderators of the discussion and are tasked with keeping the exchanges on topic, inclusive, and accessible to all participants. I worked with colleagues across campus to plan and execute forums on topics of urgent public concern in our community, including access to higher education, housing insecurity, immigration, mental health care, polarization, and gun violence. Participants came from both the campus and local communities in virtually all of the forums we hosted. While we strove to ensure that a wide range of viewpoints were represented in the conversations—thus demonstrating a fairly typical commitment to diversity—our practices were more importantly guided by an orientation to affirming the dignity of all participants. From these experiences, I offer two key lessons to be drawn about the advantages of shifting from a diversity focus to one centered around dignity.

First, a focus on diversity leads to considering the makeup of the room but does not necessarily help people question the processes and procedures by which we engage each other. A diverse participant group in a deliberative forum has the potential to facilitate the inclusion of many voices and perspectives, but on its own it does not guarantee that the historical exclusions of a broader deliberative culture—one whose public sphere routinely excluded the experiences, speaking styles, and epistemological and argumentative conventions of minority groups—are overcome (Young, 2000). What my colleagues and I found is that when we supplemented a planning focus on assembling a diverse audience with an intentional extension of dignity to all participants, we were much more likely to see productive exchanges in which all participants were welcomed and felt comfortable contributing their perspectives. Shifting our concern from diversity to dignity reminded us that a one-size-fits-all strategy will rarely mitigate the disparities that privilege some in a community while harming others. Instead, an orientation to dignity forced us to abandon the purported neutrality of equality in favor of a sense of equity that asks what each unique participant needs to feel welcomed to the conversation.

Second, dignity prioritizes an ethos of care in the context of deliberative exchanges, whereas diversity may prioritize the representation of harmful and hateful perspectives even as they enact serious harm to some participants. Deliberation moderators often struggle to balance the impartial stance that facilitation demands with their own personal commitments and views on the issue at hand. By extension, those who organize and facilitate deliberative forums often do so because of their concern for the members of their community who do not routinely get a say or whose views are not taken as seriously as others'. When we facilitate community dialogues—particularly on controversial issues—with diversity as our primary concern, we may be prompted to ensure that all perspectives get an equal hearing, no matter how discriminatory or prejudiced they may be. What diversity may have a tendency to produce in the context of deliberation is a kind of empty or superficial plurality that is valued above inclusion and equity. Reimagining our commitment as being to dignity, on the other hand, allows us to embrace a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences while at the same time insisting that norms of mutual respect and compassion govern contributions to the discussion. To

give a blunt example, a superficial sense of diversity provides a metaphorical seat at the table to White supremacy as one perspective among many that must be present in the conversation. An organizing principle of dignity, on the other hand, welcomes only those contributions that advance norms of reciprocity, mutual respect, and concern and provides forum moderators with a mechanism for discouraging perspectives that aim to subvert these values or harm others.

Deliberative forums may seem to be an unusual or potentially less effective approach to advancing EIDA work on a university campus. They are voluntary and lack any authority to implement the ideas and proposals that are discussed. They rarely produce measurable outcomes that can be assessed and documented to advance larger EIDA goals. The folks who would most benefit from learning from other perspectives are often those least likely to elect to participate in these opportunities. Yet I contend that these efforts have been highly valuable for incrementally shifting the civic capacity of our students and broader community. The conversations encourage and refine participants' ability to actively seek out and value perspectives different from their own, evaluate those perspectives for their ability to advance community norms and the common good, and synthesize diverse viewpoints to imagine new possibilities for collective action in response to urgent public concerns. For too long, higher education's diversity regimes have been almost exclusively concerned with vulgar notions of representation on campus. Inculcating dignity in active deliberative exchanges may provide one fruitful approach for escaping the limitations of traditional diversity work.

The Challenges of Assessing Dignity in Place of Diversity

Having described the two examples of diversity work with students on our campuses, we would like to offer some preliminary suggestions of the ways in which we can assess this work we do outside of the classroom. To determine the degree to which this type of work is meaningful for student growth, we need to consider how it functions to advance the values at the center of EIDA work, rather than more quantifiable measures of students success such as retention and graduation rates, grade point averages, and performance on standardized tests. Measuring the value of student engagement and development outside the classroom requires an innovative approach perhaps more attentive to capacity development than to quantifiable outcomes traditionally used to measure diversity gains.

First, we can examine university policies, procedures, and practices with an eye toward evaluating how well they accommodate inclusive participation by all stakeholders. Note here that it is the quality of the participation that matters far more than the quantity—documenting how many students, faculty, administrators, staff, or community members participate from diverse demographic groups tells us less than critically examining the nature of participation processes and opportunities. We should assess the rules that govern participation and the opportunities cultivated for voicing divergent perspectives while still maintaining norms and expectations for the treatment of all participants with dignity and mutual concern.

Second, we can assess the degree to which the university demonstrates its commitment to and valuing of EIDA work by looking at the resources leveraged (in terms of time and money, certainly, but also in terms of the credibility afforded to such efforts and the degree to which they are promoted and encouraged on campus). Simply expanding programming in terms of providing additional training and educational opportunities or standing up additional on-campus organizations and affiliate groups cannot on their own achieve a shift in values from diversity to dignity. However, institutions that actively prioritize understanding and fulfilling the needs of historically excluded groups and identities, and that financially reward those involved in EIDA labor, can begin to demonstrate a more meaningful advancement of a just and inclusive community.

Finally, to assess the success of student engagement and participation in these two different programs, we should develop original ways of tracing capacity building and influence through far-

reaching social networks. Artificially isolating the classroom space from the rest of campus and community life lessens our understanding of the impact that EIDA-informed pedagogy can have on the students we serve. Through our own EIDA work, we have committed to inculcating deliberative skills and democratic values that may shape students' approach to engaging others within and beyond the classroom. We should engage our students throughout their education to learn how they carry such capacities forward, and how those capacities equip them to pursue social change.

Conclusion: Centering Dignity in EIDA Work

This critique of diversity orthodoxies and regimes has provided us a useful prompt for rethinking our own approaches to EIDA work on our home campuses. We encourage other scholars and administrators to consider the same. As diversity has become more about “recruitment” rather than “support,” higher education institutions face difficult challenges in realizing the inclusive and equitable outcomes that diversity work typically claims to pursue. Our proposed turn in terms—from diversity to dignity—is suggested as a way to crystalize the key shift in thinking that we believe needs to happen to confront contemporary conditions of polarization, on campus and beyond. Although we both understand the necessity of having practices in place that attempt to ensure a more diverse workplace and student body, we also understand that diversity on its own and as it is enacted presently is purely aspirational. Because of this, we argue for an ideological shift that we feel could move EIDA work into a more productive direction.

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