



DEIA: Not all Initiatives are Equal

by Evan Hawkins, FACCC Executive Director

For the past few years, diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) initiatives have been ubiquitous within our colleges, associations, policies, and in nearly all professional development offerings. Our community colleges serve the most diverse and economically disadvantaged higher education students in the state. It is imperative that each of our institutions is focused on eliminating equity gaps and dismantling systemic racism. This is why FACCC has prioritized DEIA work in everything it does and will continue to do so. While we continue to emphasize this necessary work, we also need to reevaluate our approaches, their effectiveness, room for making improvements, and the consequences of not doing so.

Much of what we would today call DEIA training began in the 1960s and 1970s as a response to the civil rights movement. At the time, government agencies took the lead and were followed by corporations due to the passage of new laws. While it was undoubtedly a major step in the right direction to have these trainings institutionalized, the following decades have been inundated with ineffective instruction and initiatives. The

effectiveness of DEIA initiatives has been studied extensively in the public and private sectors with mixed results. The research on the unintended consequences of poor training is concerning with evidence showing the counterintuitive activation of racial bias.

A 2018 white paper from the journal *Anthropology Now* reviewed extensive data on antibias and diversity training in corporate and academic settings. The review outlines the negative consequences of ineffective—and counterproductive—DEIA training. For example, field and lab studies have shown that asking people to acknowledge and interrupt stereotyping can potentially reinforce stereotypes by making them “more cognitively accessible to people.” A 2018 study in the *Journal of Social Psychological and Personality Science* found that study participants exposed to messages of multiculturalism increased their beliefs in “race essentialism”—the notion that racial differences are valid, biologically based, and immutable. Deconstructing stereotypes and promoting multiculturalism are key pillars in the equity work that faculty do on our campuses, but the data shows that if done incorrectly, these practices can unintentionally amplify racial differences.

Furthermore, the *Anthropology Now* white paper outlined how employees react negatively if they feel coerced into DEIA training. It’s no secret that many institutions offer it specifically to demonstrate a well-meaning but superficial ideal of inclusive workspaces, and to achieve protection from discrimination lawsuits. As a result, employees may perceive outside training as being forced by external pressures. If DEIA training is seen as a compulsory requirement, they will likely become defensive; however, if employees know that it is internally supported and led by colleagues it can be more successful. The research shows that DEIA initiatives work best when they are bottom-up instead of top-down, and engage local decision-makers to solve equity challenges themselves. At best, mandatory external training engages only those who are already interested in DEIA work (i.e., preaching to the choir) but, at worst, makes the neutral employee potentially hostile toward DEIA work.

This research demonstrates the need for effective training and initiatives because the consequences of getting DEIA wrong are dire. As faculty leaders on our campus-

es, we are in unique positions to promote effective internal DEIA practices. While our institutions spend exorbitant resources on outside consultants and rubber-stamping practices of external and corporate-funded “equity advocates,” the evidence demonstrates that this is not necessarily the most effective vehicle of long-term effective change. As scholar Pamela Newkirk notes in her book *Diversity, Inc.: The Failed Promise of a Billion-Dollar Business*, most organizations that take this approach fall far short of their rhetoric. We must ensure that our colleges don’t make this mistake.

FACCC is committed to effective equity work based on the knowledge that systemic racism exists, and the belief that our colleges should be on the front lines of dismantling it. We need to reflect on our efforts and reconsider when the data shows that our approaches aren’t effective. While many well-meaning outside organizations have shaped how our colleges and communities approach DEIA initiatives, we must acknowledge the decades of data that reveal the ineffectiveness of the top-down approach. However, we still need to do more than reject this approach—faculty should take leadership roles in creating long-term DEIA initiatives within their colleges and associations.

Faculty members play an important role in ensuring that our institutions prioritize effective DEIA practices and in criticizing trainings that do not work toward this goal. Rethinking our strategies and approaches to equity is essential to understanding the big picture. For example, a 2020 paper in the *American Journal of Political Science* found that “gaining union membership between 2010 and 2016 reduced racial resentment among white workers.” Unfortunately, faculty—and unions particularly—have too often been an afterthought in state-level DEIA initiatives and public policy. Worse, some outside groups have used anti-union messaging to claim that union leaders don’t care about equity. Despite all of this, faculty and union leaders have an opportunity within their campuses and organizations to prove how bottom-up, faculty-led, and student-centered approaches can create systemic change on our campuses. Doing so is in the best interests of our students and communities, and also will allow faculty to be more effective advocates who take leadership roles in the creation of productive DEIA initiatives. ■