Chapter 4
Solving Wicked Diversity, Equity, and Inclusive Problems From a Design Thinking Lens

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ABSTRACT

The central question that undergirds this chapter is, "How can practitioners see learning from the student's perspective?" The authors address this question to the extent to which diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and experiential learning assessment constitute what design thinkers refer to as a wicked problem – a complex problem that benefits from a multiplicity of perspectives. It will take more than just DEI professionals to unravel these complex and interconnected issues. They look at how institutions currently seek to quantify and qualify their students' learning and experiences – proposing how design thinking, particularly the central quality of "empathy" could enhance these efforts.

INTRODUCTION

When one thinks of experiential learning, it likely conjures images of service projects, student organization participation, or leadership development programs. Others may consider learning experiences connected to academic learning like sponsored undergraduate research, internships or other practical experiences, or participation in a musical ensemble or theatrical production. Perhaps one might think about employment during college and how it can contribute to student learning and development in postsecondary education.

However, like many things, experiential learning looks different through a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) lens. While these three terms are interchangeable or as if they are one thing, each has a distinct meaning.

Diversity, according to Longmire-Avital (2021), "…reflects the representation of individual differences and the constellations of those varied intersecting differences" (p. para 5). Diversity can reflect a wide range of initiatives, from "a narrow focus on the representation of ethnic and racial minorities, to the fostering of a supportive campus climate for members of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities, to the infusion of diverse content into the academic curricula and better preparation of all students for the realities of a diverse democracy (Williams & Clowney, 2007, p. 2). In short, diversity refers to differences, including how we celebrate and navigate that difference.

The term equity is rooted in the concepts of justice. Though equity may sound similar to equality, the differences between these terms highlight an important distinction. *Equality* is everyone receiving the same treatment; *equity* is concerned with receiving what they individually need or deserve. Applying this term to higher education's central mission, the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California (2021) defined equity as "…achieving parity in student educational outcomes, regardless of race and ethnicity" (para. 1). Equity is often central to student learning and success. Brown and Fleming (2020) consider equity to be "…the outcome of educator practices that respect and nurture all aspects of student identity rather than treat them as barriers to learning" (para. 2). From an equity-minded standpoint, educators must focus on removing systematic barriers, ensuring that each person can benefit from all that college has to offer.

Inclusion is the cornerstone of DEI work because one can neither celebrate diversity or experience equity without it. For many years, student affairs literature has touted the importance of "involvement" (Austin, 1984) and "engagement" (Kuh et al., 2005) in promoting student learning and success. An essential but historically underappreciated precursor is "inclusion." How can one be involved or engaged unless they are first included? Bolder (2018) suggests that inclusion "…is about folks with different identities feeling and being valued, leveraged, and welcomed within a given setting" (para. 15). Thus, inclusion is necessary to ensure that all people have access to the same opportunities, receive the same level of respect, treatment, and value—regardless of innate or perceived differences (Harris, 2019). Inclusion is subjective (Tobbell et al., 2021) and is shaped by students' experience at an institution, which may send perceivable signals of inclusion or exclusion.

Dafina-Lazarus Stewart (2017) offers a framework for differentiating these terms and putting them into context. She writes, "Diversity asks, 'Who's in the room?' Equity responds: 'Who is trying to get in the room but can't? Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?' Inclusion asks, 'Has everyone's ideas been heard?' Justice responds, 'Whose ideas won't be taken as seriously because they aren't in the majority?' As we begin this chapter, let us extrapolate these questions to experiential learning. Who benefits from experiential learning? Who does not? What barriers exist that inhibit participation in these kinds of learning experiences for minoritized students and those who are from marginalized identities? Moreover, perhaps most importantly, what are these students trying to tell us about their experiences? This last question is of utmost importance because it relates to how we engage with students in this work.

Many are also familiar with the well-known quote from Verna Myers that, "Diversity is being asked to the party. Inclusion is being asked to dance" (Sherbin & Rashid, 2017, para. 2). Junday (2017) offers a reframing that underscores the importance of agency in dismantling systems of oppression, writing, "Inclusion isn't 'being asked to dance" (para. 1) it is "getting to pick the music" (para. 13). Applying this metaphor to the focus of this chapter, we begin by asking—is how we measure the experiences and learning on our campuses simply inviting students to the party, asking them to dance with us, or do we

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