Toward a Model of Inclusive Excellence and Change in Postsecondary Institutions

By Damon A. Williams, Joseph B. Berger, and Shederick A. McClendon
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**About AAC&U/About the Authors**

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Acknowledgments

AAC&U would like to thank the following groups for their contributions to these papers.

- *The authors*, for carefully working through the connections between their areas of research and the overarching goals of the Making Excellence Inclusive initiative.

- *The educators, students and community members* who participated in the Inclusive Excellence forums across the country; *the members of the pilot campuses* who reviewed and provided feedback on earlier drafts of the papers; and *the 2005 Greater Expectations Summer Institute participants* who used insights from these papers to enhance their educational action plans.

- *AAC&U staff*, especially Nancy O’Neill, who edited the papers and coordinated the production process.
Introduction to the Series

Background

The educational environment following the recent Supreme Court decisions on affirmative action calls for colleges and universities to connect their educational quality and inclusion efforts more fundamentally and comprehensively than ever before. This challenge, however, presents a set of difficult questions. What will the next generation of work on inclusion and excellence look like? How will both our thinking and our actions need to shift? Who will need to be involved? How will we know we are accomplishing our goals?

This introduction prefaces three papers commissioned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) to respond to these questions and to provide an intellectual backdrop for its new initiative, Making Excellence Inclusive. With initial funding from the Ford Foundation, this multiyear initiative is designed to help campuses: (a) integrate their diversity and quality efforts, (b) situate this work at the core of institutional functioning, and (c) realize the educational benefits available to students and to the institution when this integration is done well and is sustained over time. We feel strongly, and evidence is beginning to show, that integrating diversity and quality initiatives—as with the forging of elements into an alloy—produces something that is both different than its constituent elements and stronger and more durable.

As an “alloy,” Inclusive Excellence re-visions both quality and diversity. It reflects a striving for excellence in higher education that has been made more inclusive by decades of work to infuse diversity into recruiting, admissions, and hiring; into the curriculum and cocurriculum; and into administrative structures and practices. It also embraces newer forms of excellence, and expanded ways to measure excellence, that take into account research on learning and brain functioning, the assessment movement, and more nuanced accountability structures. Likewise, diversity and inclusion efforts move beyond numbers of students or numbers of programs as end goals. Instead, they are multilayered processes through which we achieve excellence in learning; research and teaching; student development; local and global community engagement; workforce development; and more.

1 We also use the term “Inclusive Excellence” to capture this notion.
Mapping the Future of Inclusion and Excellence

Each of the three commissioned papers—Making Diversity Work on Campus: A Research-Based Perspective; Achieving Equitable Educational Outcomes with All Students: The Institution’s Roles and Responsibilities; and Toward a Model of Inclusive Excellence and Change in Postsecondary Institutions—addresses one or more aspects of the work that is needed to comprehensively link diversity and quality. Collectively, they offer readers fresh perspectives on, and evidence-based approaches to, embedding this work into campus culture and sustaining this work over time.

In the first paper, Making Diversity Work on Campus: A Research-Based Perspective, Jeffrey Miler, Mitchell Chang, and Anthony Antonio discuss recent empirical evidence that demonstrates the educational benefits of diverse learning environments. The evidence, gathered on behalf of the University of Michigan in its defense of its affirmative action policies before the Supreme Court, indicates that diversity must be carried out in intentional ways in order to accrue educational benefits for students and for the institution. **The authors argue persuasively for a conception of diversity as a process toward better learning** rather than as an outcome—a certain percentage of students of color, a certain number of programs—to be checked off a list. They also provide numerous suggestions for how to “engage” diversity in the service of learning, ranging from recruiting a compositionally diverse student body, faculty, and staff; to developing a positive campus climate; to transforming curriculum, cocurriculum, and pedagogy to reflect and support goals for inclusion and excellence.

In the second paper, Achieving Equitable Educational Outcomes with All Students: The Institution’s Roles and Responsibilities, Georgia Bauman, Leticia Tomas Bustillos, Estela Bensimon, Christopher Brown, and RoSusan Bartee discuss the responsibility that institutions have to examine the impact that traditional higher education practices have on those students historically underserved by higher education, including African American, Latino/a, and American Indian students. With the persistent achievement gap facing African American and Latino/a students as a starting point, the authors argue that if we do not commit to discovering what does and does not work for historically underserved students, we run the very real risk of failing a significant portion of today’s college students—**even as we diversify our campuses to a greater extent than ever before.** To demonstrate the kind of institutional commitment that is
needed, the authors present one campus’s process for systematically monitoring and addressing the inequities they discovered.

In the third paper, Toward a Model of Inclusive Excellence in Postsecondary Institutions, Damon Williams, Joseph Berger, and Shedrick McClendon offer a framework for comprehensive organizational change to help campuses achieve Inclusive Excellence. The authors review several dimensions of organizational culture that must be engaged to achieve this goal and discuss a method to help campuses monitor changes that might come from introducing new systems and new practices. The resulting framework, perhaps most importantly, helps campus leaders focus simultaneously on the “big picture”—an academy that systematically leverages diversity for student learning and institutional excellence—and the myriad individual pieces that contribute to that picture (see box 1).

**Box 1. From diversity as an isolated initiative to diversity as a catalyst for educational excellence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Isolated Initiative: Increase racial/ethnic diversity of student body</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Responds to:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Calls from business and community leaders to strengthen workforce diversity</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Desire to redress past societal inequities</td>
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<tr>
<td>• General feeling that diversifying student body is the “right thing to do”</td>
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<tr>
<td>But does not address:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Compositional diversity of other parts of campus community (faculty, staff, administrators)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Differences between predominantly white institutions and predominantly minority-serving institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Campus climate once students and others arrive on campus</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Students’ multiple identities: race and ethnicity intersecting with gender, class, sexual orientation, national/regional origin, ability, and religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Curriculum transformation to include perspectives, sources, and modes of inquiry heretofore left out of the academy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How compositional diversity influences classroom and cocurricular practices, and ultimately, student learning</td>
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</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Catalyst for Educational Excellence: Increase racial/ethnic diversity of student body as part of comprehensive plan to make excellence inclusive</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Also responds to:</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Need to enact diversity in intentional ways that enhance students’ intercultural competency, cognitive complexity, and ability to work in diverse groups (Milem et al.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Need to address equity in academic achievement for all students, with particular attention paid to groups historically underrepresented in higher education (Bauman et al.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Need to engage entire campus community in conceiving of, carrying out, and assessing a comprehensive process to enact diverse learning environments (Williams et al.)</td>
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Defining "Inclusive Excellence"

At the outset of this initiative, AAC&U advanced an operational definition of Inclusive Excellence. This definition is intended to be flexible enough to be "localized" by a campus while also retaining basic principles to guide a national movement and to connect campuses in these efforts. The definition consists of four primary elements:

1. A focus on student intellectual and social development. Academically, it means offering the best possible course of study for the context in which the education is offered.²

2. A purposeful development and utilization of organizational resources to enhance student learning. Organizationally, it means establishing an environment that challenges each student to achieve academically at high levels and each member of the campus to contribute to learning and knowledge development.

3. Attention to the cultural differences learners bring to the educational experience and that enhance the enterprise.³

4. A welcoming community that engages all of its diversity in the service of student and organizational learning.

Each set of authors received this definition when they were commissioned to write the papers, and each connected it to existing and emerging research on subjects as varied as the educational benefits of diversity, the achievement gap, and organizational change. We expect this reworking to occur in the field also, as campus leaders juxtapose the definition against institutional mission, policies, and practices. At the same time, we believe the definition is incomplete without all four elements in play, and the large questions posed at the beginning of this introduction cannot be answered without having all four present.

Why Now?

Making Excellence Inclusive builds on major AAC&U initiatives—most notably, Greater Expectations and American Commitments—and ties together the association’s long-standing interest in educational quality in the undergraduate curriculum, in diversity and civic

³ "Best" here implies the provision of qualified instructors and sufficient resources—including other learners—as well as a sequence of study that is coherent and challenging, and one that comprehensively addresses the student learning goals of the particular institution. Contexts vary from preschool to postgraduate education, by affiliation (e.g., religious or secular), and by sector (e.g., elementary, high schools, community colleges, research universities).

³ Cultural differences include race/ethnicity (e.g., Latino, Caucasian, Asian/Pacific Islander, African American, American Indian), class, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, first language, physical and learning ability, and learning style.
engagement, and in preparing faculty to deepen students' learning. It is designed to address the following four dilemmas confronting higher education today.

**Islands of Innovations with Too Little Influence on Institutional Structures**

Hardly any campus is without some tangible, and often impressive, number of initiatives to help create more inclusive environments, more expansive intellectual horizons, or more opportunities for outreach to the larger community. Yet how does a campus coordinate these multiple efforts so they have a greater impact on all students, and on the institution as a whole? One frequently can identify educational innovations, but rarely can one detect structures that link them. Accordingly, the impact of these innovations is isolated rather than pervasive. And with so many individual diversity initiatives springing up like daffodils in springtime, people long for coherence, cohesion, and collaboration. They also want to figure out how to “get it right” as they move through this astounding transition to an inclusive academy that strives for diversity and excellence.

**The Disconnect between Diversity and Educational Excellence**

Although we know meaningful engagement with diversity benefits students educationally, little has been done to create a comprehensive framework for excellence that incorporates diversity at its core. Similarly, new research about how to help diverse and differentially prepared students succeed has not yet provoked widespread change across higher education. And diversity is not typically a focus at any level in “quality improvement” efforts. As a result, education leaders routinely work on diversity initiatives within one committee on campus and work or strengthening the quality of the educational experience within another. This disconnect serves students—and all of education—poorly.

**Disparities in Academic Success across Groups**

There has been significant progress in expanding access to college for underrepresented students. Yet many of these students experience differential retention rates and inequities in academic achievement. This troubling achievement gap, especially across specific racial and ethnic groups and across different income levels, signals failure, not only for the individual
students affected but also for the colleges and universities they attend and for the educational system as a whole.

The 'Post-Michigan' Environment

The U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decisions in the recent University of Michigan cases affirm the value of diversity when tied to the educational purpose and mission of an institution. At this historic juncture, it is imperative that higher education leaders seize the opportunity to help colleges and universities—and the public—better understand how diversity and educational quality are intertwined. Despite the Court's affirmation, those opposed to affirmative action continue to bring lawsuits, organize anti-affirmative action referenda, and influence public opinion. While many campuses feel pressure to move into "compliance mode," AAC&U aims to help institutions establish diversity as a core component in achieving desired student learning outcomes and put diversity and inclusion efforts at the center of their decision-making. In order to reach this academic higher ground, diversity, inclusion, and equity initiatives must be so fundamentally linked to educational mission that to ignore them in everyday practice would jeopardize institutional vitality.

A Comprehensive Response

Initially, Making Excellence Inclusive seeks to bring about comprehensive educational reform based on research and theory not only about "what works" to help all students achieve new forms and levels of excellence, but also about what makes for responsive, educationally powerful colleges and universities. In addition to commissioning these three papers, AAC&U has organized several other "foundational" activities. We have held thirteen forums around the country where key education stakeholders discussed how our conception of Inclusive Excellence can serve as a catalyst for institutional renewal and to identify promising practices toward that end. We launched a pilot project with nine institutions to test the usefulness of new frameworks for inclusion and institutional change, and we are starting to build a collection of practical resources to help campuses enact these frameworks.

Looking ahead, we plan to work with a broad range of postsecondary institutions to make Inclusive Excellence a signature element of America's best colleges and universities. We will engage campus leaders in refining our current definition of Inclusive Excellence and ask them to
document their challenges and successes as we work together to make excellence inclusive. In the process, we will continue to build our resource collection by featuring campus “success stories” and developing tools that reflect the latest research “what works” in fostering inclusive and educationally powerful learning environments.

Conclusion

The three papers, taken together, form a rich dialogue where similarities and dissimilarities arise and information that is gleaned from one is made richer by the others. We hope they will engender this same kind of interplay between people on campuses, as well as provide them with practical evidence, support, and guidance for this ongoing work. The efforts needed to make excellence inclusive cannot be done by any person, unit, or campus alone. Nor will it look the same everywhere. What individuals and institutions will share are its hallmarks—an ongoing, systemic awareness of the “state of the campus” and the “state of higher education” regarding the interconnectedness of diversity and quality, an active process of engaging diversity in the service of learning, and the courage to reflect on our efforts and to improve them where needed. Please visit AAC&U’s Web site (www.aacu.org) for updates about the Making Excellence Inclusive initiative, including the evolving resource collection that will support our shared endeavor of helping all students develop the intellectual, social, emotional, cultural, and civic capacities needed to lead in this new century.

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