Mobilizing and Sustaining EDI Change in the Academy through Leadership, Governance, and Accountability

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One might argue that Canadian universities began *formally* committing to equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) in the late 80s and early 90s – a time that saw the commissioning of task forces to examine surfacing EDI-related climate issues and the subsequent publication of robust reports recommending appropriate strategic actions, as well as the inaugural codification of EDI-related policies to ensure compliance with relatively new Human Rights (1977) and Employment Equity (1986/1995) legislation, and the proliferation of offices mandated to prevent and respond to these EDI related issues in accordance with the legislation. More than 30 years after this first wave of efforts to addressed campus EDI issues, I reflect on the reality that the sector continues to grapple with profound and enduring challenges to making meaningful progress on EDI.

One particularly elusive goal has been the aim to shift the compositional diversity of faculty and senior administrators to increase the representation of women and members of racially minoritized communities, and especially racialized women, to better reflect the proportion of prospective women and racialized professors and leaders in the Canadian labour market and population. A team of Canadian scholars recently authored a book entitled *The Equity Myth: Racialization and Indigeneity at Canadian Universities*, which provides quantitative and qualitative evidence of the chronic under-representation of racialized faculty members[1].

According to one study[2], the proportion of Canadians who identify as members of a "visibly minority[3]" (VM) group and possess a doctoral degree (representing the existing talent pool or 'pipeline' for the professoriate) grew from 18.7% in 1986 to 24.5% in 2006. However, the proportion of VM professors employed at universities was only 16.9% in 2006. Compared with the existing talent pool or pipeline, there appears to be a -7.6% point gap in representation among these individuals. Interestingly, the study found a +8% point differential between the proportion of women who earned a doctorate and the proportion employed at universities, as well as an improving representation trend for women faculty members between 1991 and 2006, while racialized faculty experienced a worsening trend in representation during this same time period.

As well, while women seem to be relatively well-represented and sometimes over-represented among faculty in certain disciplines and ranks in academia, they remain under-represented in STEM fields and leadership roles. Although women represent 47.4% of the Canadian population, only 21.9% of the Canadian STEM workforce are women (Statistics Canada, 2008). Women also are under-represented in progressively more senior faculty appointments, as well as among the ranks of senior leadership appointments. A 2019 [survey](#) of member institutions conducted by Universities Canada highlighted the underrepresentation of racialized people among senior leadership as a key finding, and flagged the lingering underrepresentation of women in executive roles:

> While racialized people represent 8% of senior leaders, they represent 21% of full-time faculty, 31% of doctorate holders and 22% of the Canadian general population. While the proportion of women in senior leadership positions (49%) in universities is now almost proportionate to that of men, there remain few women in the executive head and vice-president positions at Canadian universities.[4]

Studies continue to demonstrate the layers of inequity facing women and racialized faculty and academic leaders beyond compositional diversity, including inequities in wages paid, grants awarded, career development and promotion opportunities provided, and assessment of progression milestones achieved, for example.[5,6] Numerous testimonials from equity-seeking students, staff, and scholars and a growing body of empirically tested qualitative and quantitative evidence support the reality that, while we've made some important strides to advance EDI in higher education, there is still much work to be done to reflect meaningful progress.

Statements of commitment are not enough to mobilize and sustain change. Despite our best intentions, articulations of passive values risk being rendered merely as virtue signalling — an attempt to demonstrate good moral character simply through stating rather than acting on a moral imperative. Overtime, words said in the absence of deeds done will erode community trust and confidence in the authenticity of any articulated value for and commitment to EDI.

The reality of enduring challenges to meaningful EDI progress in the academy begs the following questions:

- Why haven't we been able to progress further than we might have expected by this time?
- How must we understand the roots of the profound and persistent barriers?
- What are the rights strategies needed to overcome these barriers?
- Who can influence substantive and sustained change given the academic organization?

Having contemplated these questions over the last 30 years, from my various lived experience, academic, and professional vantage points as a racialized woman, scholar and instructor of EDI-related subjects, practitioner in various not-for-profit community-based social service organizations, and senior administrator of student affairs and EDI offices and priorities in higher education, I have come to appreciate that there are three key pre-conditions to meaningfully advancing EDI in the academy. On their own, these essential components remain necessary but insufficient, but together, and with a constellation of other best practices, they have the capacity to unlock the paucity of progress we are experiencing. The three essential pre-conditions I will discuss below are:

- The requisite paradigm shift needed to embrace the concept of inclusive excellence and move from compliance to accountability models to sustain EDI change;
- The requisite 'both-and' approach needed to establish *both* dedicated 'Senior Diversity Officer' roles *and* distributed inclusive leadership and governance models to mobilize campus-wide change; and
- The requisite intentional and strategic actions needed to drive EDI change and an iterative process of continual improvement through effective and inclusive leadership, governance, and accountability.[7]

From Benevolence and Compliance to Justice and Excellence: Leveraging A Paradigm Shift in Accountability

The first and foremost pre-condition is that we get beyond thinking and talking about EDI in terms of benevolence (the nice thing to do when we are feeling charitable) and in terms of compliance (the thing we are told we must do or suffer the consequence). Behaviour motivated by compliance does not generate long-lasting progress and culture change.

Without an understanding of and engagement in their underlying purpose and goals, compliance measures typically have the effect of, at best, tweaking observable surface-level individual behaviours, while failing to address systemic deeper-level and often hidden personally mediated biases and structural inequities. Instead, we need to understand and enact EDI priorities in terms of their necessity to justice (the right thing to do for equality of opportunity and inclusion) and in terms of excellence (the bet and smart thing to do to ensure creativity, innovation, competitive advantage and relevance). We need to adopt an inclusive excellence paradigm.

Between 2017 and 2019, three sector-wide initiatives signalled the need to think about EDI in terms of inclusion excellence – the concept that recognizes the integral relationship between diversity and quality in research, teaching, service, and governance[8]. The first initiative was the codification of the Tri-agency EDI Action Plan Requirements for all universities receiving funding through the Canada Research Chairs Program (CRCP). The second initiative was the articulation of a set of Inclusive Excellences Principles by Universities Canada (UC) to guide universities in their efforts to advance EDI and inclusive excellence, and the development of a complementary EDI Action Plan to ensure accountability of the UC to deliver on its promise to support members universities in their efforts. The third initiatives was the Government of Canada pilot Dimensions EDI Program to support transformational EDI efforts in the post-secondary environment.

The Tri-Agency CRCP Requirements, the UC Inclusive Excellence Principles and Action Plan, and the Federal Dimensions Program, respectively, attempt to use compliance with established standards, accountability and support for values, and incentives and rewards for exemplary practice to mobilize behaviour change. While the sector's modest gains in relation to EDI have arguably proven the need for some compliance levers to initiative immediate behaviour change, EDI compliance measures, particularly quantitative measures of compositional diversity, do not sufficiently account for the complex social and cultural barriers to EDI progress. Behaviour motivated by compliance does not generate long-lasting progress and culture change. Without an understanding of and engagement in their underlying purpose and goals, compliance measures typically have the effect of, at best, tweaking observable surface-level individual behaviours, while failing to address systemic deeper-level and often hidden personally-mediated biases and structural inequities.

Last year, a Lancet article entitled *The good, the bad, and the ugly of implicit bias* asserted that: "Implicit bias training has had some success in changing individual-level beliefs and actions, but meta-analyses suggest it is largely ineffective in diminishing institutional inequities"[9], This article reinforced the need to mitigate personally-mediated (individual) biases *and* work to remove systemic (structural and cultural) barrier to equity at the same time. It is imperative to develop and consistently apply pan-institutional accountability measures and provide EDI-informed policies, as well as procedure implementation training and tools to enable the paradigm shift that is needed to see transformative change.

For the past two decades, studies have asserted that overcoming the profound effects of implicit unconscious bias on gender inequity, in the context of faculty and leadership hiring, would only be overcome by more intentional and transformative efforts in recruitment and retention[10]. This assessment can be extended to the same observation for race-related bias and consequent systemic barriers facing racialized persons. Critical race and feminist scholars have asserted that inadequate attention to systemic structural race-related and gender inequities in higher education, and particularly policy non-performativity, have not only exacerbated the under-representation of women and racialized faculty and leaders, but have also generated a chilly climate experienced by these groups.[11]

Nonetheless, the Tri-agency, UC, and Federal Government imperatives have led to some observable changes in process, with some positive outcomes to date. These initiatives have been catalytic in galvanizing EDI efforts on campuses, urging academic communities and senior leaders to move beyond passive articulation of value for EDI towards demonstrable change. The Tri-agency initiative has triggered an interrogation of goalsetting exercises and enriched the dialogue about appropriate qualitative as well as quantitative process and outcome measures and indicators of success. The UC Principles have reframed the EDI conversation to squarely situate it as being about excellence, and the Action Plan activities are building sector-wide capacity primarily through EDI knowledge generation and dissemination. The Dimensions Program, in its beginning stages, has already accomplished sector-wide engagement in efforts to showcase award worthy EDI efforts through active participation in or affiliate status with the Program. All three initiatives have highlighted the need for rigorous data-informed decision-making and evidence-based practice for successful EDI change efforts.

To influence longer-term individual, structural and culture change, and measurable outcomes, we need to ensure that the case for EDI and inclusive excellence clearly and strongly communicates the growing body of evidence that demonstrates:

(1) the benefits of diversity to academic, educational and organizational excellence;

(2) the barriers to equal opportunity and inclusion for women and racialized faculty and leaders; and

(3) the best practices to build capacity to recruit and retain a diversity of excellent people into the ranks of the professoriate and senior leadership.

Leveraging the Dedicated CDO and a Distributed Inclusive Leadership Model of Governance

The second pre-conditions is that we embrace a strategic multi-level[12,13,14,15] organizational change effort, which is inspired and driven by senior leadership in order that the effort may be welcomed and advanced through a networked and distributed model of leadership. A 'top down' and 'bottom up' approach to EDI organizational change is necessary in a an academic organizational social system that relies on a complex mix of bureaucratic, technocratic, political, organized-anarchy, and collegial models[16] of governance taking place everywhere and all at the same time! In other words, a robust EDI strategy and sound organizational change management processes are essential to a successful system-wide and sustained EDI change effort which must be implemented and evaluated across interconnected individual, institutional, and systemic levels of the university. Change efforts must be intentionally holistic to influence personal, structural, and cultural change[17], which is manifested in: individual values, beliefs, attitudes, knowledge, and skills; organizational systems, policies, and programs; and community norms or "unspoken rules", everyday practices, and the university ethos.

Crucial to the conversation about effective EDI leadership and governance is the emergence of dedicated EDI specialists with the necessary skills and subject-matter expertise, position within the organizational hierarchy, and dedicated mandate to champion, and often lead, the advancement of pan-institutional EDI and inclusive excellence priorities. In the United States, there has been a proliferation of these senior-most EDI specialist roles called 'Chief Diversity Officers'.

In Canada, a few of these roles – I'll refer to them as Senior Diversity Officers (SDOs) – emerged about 10 – 15 years ago, and they have multiplied in the last three years, coinciding with the initiation of the Tri-agency Council, Universities Canada, and the Government of Canada imperatives discussed above. Before these pronouncements, only a handful of universities had developed EDI strategies, integrated EDI into their broader academic strategies, or invested in appointing an SDO. A 2020 environmental scan reveals that twelve Canadian universities have appointed SDOs at the level of Vice-President, Vice-Provost, Associate Vice-President, or Assistant Vice-President: UBC, Calgary, Carleton, Dalhousie, Guelph, Laurentian, Laurier, Memorial, McMaster, Queen's, Ryerson, and Waterloo.

The presence of an SDO is one important indicator of institutional commitment and capacity to advancing EDI and inclusive excellence. However, both a dedicated and distributed leadership model of EDI leadership and governance is needed to adequately integrate EDI principles and practices across all levels of strategic and operational decision-making, thereby facilitating institutional and systemic level of change. Given the large size of and diverse stakeholders in institutions of higher learning, given the breadth of the task to advance pan-institutional EDI priorities, given the unit-level organizational and disciplinary cultural differences, and given recommended best practices for changing behaviours within concentric circles of influence, it is essential to begin to hire for and develop EDI competencies and inclusive leadership qualities. At the very least, it is essential to promote EDI literacy across all senior leadership roles and EDI fluency across distributed unit-level academic and administrative leadership roles. Such literacy and fluency may be found among those individuals who can both articulate *and* demonstrate meaningful engagements in and contributions to EDI in academic, profession, and/or community-based contexts. A recent report on the emergence and efficacy of the CDO role in the U.S. context found an interesting relationship between the existence of a chief diversity officer and the gender and ethnic diversity of an institution's academic and administrative leadership (e.g., deans and vice presidents)[18]. While the report indicates that there was no evidence of the presence of a CDO being correlated to higher rates of representation of women and racialized persons across senior leadership levels, the report does cite overwhelmingly higher and statistically significant rates of representation of women and racialized persons among the senior leaders that reported to Presidents and Provosts who themselves identified as women and/or members of racialized groups.

The finding described above demonstrates another benefit of improving the representation of women and racialized people among the ranks of leaders in the academy. While, university leaders should be expected to demonstrate and develop qualities of inclusive leadership – whether as EDI agents or allies – frequently, but not always, EDI literacies and fluencies are more developed among those who have reflected and worked on EDI issues through their lived experiences. Many women and racialized leaders may have already has the opportunity to develop the six signature inclusive leadership qualities[19] that a recent Deloitte study has identified for facilitating better discernment of personally-mediated biases and dismantling of systemic barriers in a variety of institutional processes and practices: commitment, courage, cognizance of bias, curiosity, cultural intelligence, and collaboration.

Leveraging Strategic Planning and Continuous Improvement for Long-Lasting Culture Change

The third essential pre-condition is strategic change agency. As has been discussed, leadership, governance, and accountability are foundational drivers to advancing organizational EDI change within the context of a broader institution-wide vision and strategy for change, which includes a commitment to iterative processes for assessment and continuous improvement. That said, while an institutional strategy can be the 'game-changer', institutional culture can be the 'deal-breaker'. An institutional strategy provides a roadmap to advancing EDI priorities and goals, however, the prevailing institutional culture – which is the manifestation of the most prevalent values, beliefs, and patterns of behaviour that permeate across the institution – will ultimately act to enable or impede the path to success. The prevailing institutional culture, and consequent climate, will be most evident and felt in the everyday individual practices of community members, as well as in the unspoken rules and norms accepted across the university. Therefore, not only is there a need for effective and inclusive leadership, governance, and accountability structures and systems, more importantly, there is a need for effective and inclusive change agency. Success, in large part, will rely on the extent to which decision-makers and influencers not only reinforce and reward those behaviours and practices which demonstrate alignment with and enhancement of strategic EDI priorities, but also on extent to which they feel motivated, empowered and compelled to interrupt and respond to those everyday patterns of behaviour and practices that may diminish or undermine the vision and strategy towards inclusive excellence.

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[3] The terms racialized of racially minoritized are more contemporary and preferred ways to reference individuals who fit the Government of Canada definition of 'visible minority', which, according to the Federal Employment Equity Act, refers to persons, other than Indigenous peoples, who do not identify as Caucasian, European, and/or White in race, ethnicity, origin, and/or colour, regardless of birthplace or citizenship.)

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