



Higher Ed Rewired

Season 2, Episode 7

Conversation with Leading Authors on Equity

Host: Annet Rangel

Guests: Tia Brown McNair, Bryan Alexander & Lindsay Pérez Huber

Higher Ed Rewired engages listeners in a conversation with a panel of nationally recognized authors who will discuss their recent books and share insight on equity and student success. Listen to Tia Brown McNair “From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education” (2020) and “Becoming A Student Ready College” (2016), Bryan Alexander “Academia Next: The Futures of Higher Education (2021) and Lindsay Pérez Huber “Why They Hate Us: How Racist Rhetoric Impacts Education” (2021) talk about everything from the books on their bedside stands to what inspired them as scholars in their field. Whether their work informs student success strategy or guides your professional development agenda, these are the authors you want on your summer reading list.

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Tia Brown McNair: I feel like we've done a good job of moving the needle on identifying equity gaps and disaggregating data. But I don't think we're doing a good job of building institutional capacity to focus on the process for achieving equity.

Annet Rangel: This past season, on Higher Ed Rewired, you've been listening to countless educational leaders and students talk about where we're at and where we're going in the higher education system.

Lindsay Perez Huber: I think our students are pushing for more than just support right now. They really want to think about the ways that we transform institutions and that we create institutions that serve us because they were not created for us.

Our goal is to host conversations that help push the needle forward, and that's exactly what we're doing in this episode today.

Bryan Alexander: We recommitted to two things. We recommitted to teaching and learning, and we've recommitted to racial justice. And I'm awestruck that we could do that in the middle of a devastating pandemic and political chaos and economic catastrophe.

We sat down—or rather Zoomed—with three book authors who are leading the conversation on innovative strategies to create equitable practices in higher ed...

[THEME SONG STARTS UP AND PLAYS]

Higher Ed Rewired is a production of the California State University. The largest, most diverse four-year public university system in the country and an engine of social and economic mobility. Each episode examines groundbreaking research and exciting innovations taking place across the nation that are transforming the pathways for student success.

Annet Rangel: Welcome to Higher Ed Rewired, I'm Annet Rangel.

Today's episode is a special one.

We've created a panel of nationally-recognized, best-selling authors to discuss their recent books and share reflections on the hottest trends, issues and successes in higher ed.

<Theme Music Ring Out>

Annet Rangel: So let's just get started. With us, we have Tia Brown McNair, the vice president in Office of Diversity, Equity and Student Success. And also she's an executive director for the Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation, Campus Centers at the Association of American Colleges and Universities in Washington, D.C. So the book that she co-wrote is called *From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice and Higher in Higher Education*. So Tia, thank you so much for being with us today.

Tia Brown McNair: Thank you. I'm looking forward to the conversation.

Annet Rangel: Of course. So before we introduce the rest of the folks here. Colleges and universities have a history of documented equity gaps. We know this and especially when we're looking at access, persistence and even completion rates. The research and books you have written are specific to equity and inclusivity in higher education, what do you see as the biggest challenges?

Tia Brown McNair: Well, I have the opportunity at the Association of American Colleges and Universities to work with hundreds of institutions over the past 10 years of my time there. And I think that institutions are facing a lot of challenges, especially right now, in relationship to equity and education. I don't think there's as much attention focused on the process for achieving equity and those goals and building the personnel capacity to actually do that particular work. I think we still have to focus a lot on how educators engage when their own sense making it about equity and how that translates into implementation, design, analysis, assessment of those efforts to, to address equity. I think we still struggle with identifying how an equity shows how

racism shows up on our campuses, how racialized practices show up. So I feel like we've done a good job of moving the needle on identifying equity gaps and disaggregating data. But I don't think we're doing a good job of building institutional capacity to focus on the process for achieving equity.

Annet Rangel: I think that's a lovely segue into one of our next speakers here. We have Lindsay Perez Huber. Lindsay is the associate professor in the social and cultural analysis of education's master's program at California State University, Long Beach. And she's the author of *Why They Hate US How Racist Rhetoric Impacts Education*. A very powerful title, I think. Welcome.

Lindsay Perez Huber: Thank you and good to be here.

Annet Rangel: As you know, when you think about your life experiences and your academic journey, what in particular led you to focus on your area of research?

Lindsay Perez Huber: There's two really important things that happened in my trajectory that I think are most relevant to higher education. The first one was the reason that I pursued a Ph.D. in the first place, and that was really because of my background as a first-gen, person of color, being from a Chicano family. Coming into my first year of undergrad, I was invited to participate in the summer bridge program. So from the summer bridge program, which is a program that focuses on first-gen students from working class backgrounds, I was kind of pipelined in from there. The second thing was ethnic studies. Ethnic studies changed my academic trajectory, fundamentally. And so when I found Ethnic studies as an undergraduate student. I knew that that was something that I wanted to do as the Ph.D. eventually. So my interest in education and my interest in Ethnic studies and how it spoke to my background, how it spoke to my community, I knew was something I wanted to pursue later on in my academic career.

Annet Rangel: Thank you so much. I love already seeing, like heads nodding, but connections that are being felt in this conversation already just with introductions. So finally, we have joining us, Bryan Alexander. He's a futurist, a faculty member and senior scholar at Georgetown University. He also wrote the book *Accademia Next, The Futures of Higher Education*. So welcome.

Bryan Alexander: Thank you very much. It's great to be here.

Annet Rangel: Yeah. So, Bryan, you look at a broad array of trends in higher education, but specifically you have insights into technology. So what do you think are the major challenges in strengthening student outcomes right now?

Bryan Alexander: Well, there are a lot of opportunities in technology, as well as a lot of really serious challenges. One of the challenges is, how to do the digital divide that is in the United States. There are a lot of ways that one of the forces that keep people on the wrong side of the digital divide, that is where they don't have sufficient bandwidth or access to devices or access

to human infrastructure, the ability to learn. One of those is geographical, one of those is education, another one is income. But as vice president McNair mentioned, some of this is racialized as well. It has to do with people who, often of color, who cannot access the technology to use. We found a lot of that happening last spring and that's continued or the summer, fall and right now this semester. So that's one of the major challenges.

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Bryan Alexander: Some of the opportunities we have have to do with openness. That is, we have the ability to make open education resources. Resources that anybody can access and for either no cost or for a very low cost and a lot of ways to do this. So supporting open access and pushing open access is another way we can use technology to be more just.

<BRING UP MUSIC, RING OUT>

Annet Rangel: Dr. Bryan Alexander, Dr. Lindsay Perez Huber and Dr. Tia Brown McNair are authors whose books are focused on innovation and how to make the college and university system a better, more equitable place for students.

But, of course, there are institutional systemic barriers holding higher education back from making that goal a reality.

So while we had some of the greatest higher ed minds all assembled we asked a big question:

What challenges in the system do schools need to address, and how can they better support students?

Dr. Tia Brown McNair shared her thoughts first....

Tia Brown McNair: We have to think about how to support our students during this time where they are experiencing basic need insecurities, where they are trying to navigate the complexities and their priorities with being engaged and as students, but also engaged within their families and within their communities. I want to acknowledge the lived experiences of our students and their ability to even continue on this journey in the midst of all of the chaos that right now is around us. But for institutions when we're talking about equity and student success, we've identified in our book common obstacles that institutions face: not being able to understand whiteness, not being able to understand privilege, not being able to understand how we have used whiteness and define whiteness as the norm of excellence and of student success and being able to analyze that in a way and address it in a way so that we can, as Estella Bensimon says, all the time, to remediate our behaviors. I think we haven't, we don't have a way of really thinking about race critically. I think that we're still struggling with that. I think we also are struggling with different obstacles about understanding our student experiences.

I think claiming not to see race as one is our one of our first obstacles that a lot of times educators say that we focus and teach content. We don't look at student identity. Well, that's not seeing and understanding the historical and political and social and cultural constructs of race and how that influences the student experience.

<MUSIC BEAT, CONTINUES TO PLAY UNDER>

Tia Brown McNair: Even how we define equity gaps is based on privilege and a hierarchy of human value. Oftentimes, we set up equity gaps as the performance of majority students and then we disaggregate the data by how are you going to do that on your campus. And we say that we close equity gaps based on whether or not are minorities and marginalized students reach the level of our majority students, which are oftentimes are white students.

So I think that we have a lot of work to do on identifying how inequities and racialized practices exist at our institutions. And I think we don't have the capacity, and I don't mean capacity in a negative way. I mean that we don't have the training and the professional development and the preparation to engage deeply in those conversations. And I don't think it can be done by a one hour seminar or two hour seminar. Those things is actually changing the culture of the institution and the mindset shifts. And I think we need to be more intentional about that.

Annet Rangel: Absolutely. What you described is how so many colleges are taking on the goal of addressing the issue of equity on their campuses. Does this mean that we have it all wrong? Dr. Perez Huber, what do you think?

Lindsay Perez Huber: I think what I'm hearing from students is very similar to what many faculty of color are experiencing right now in higher ed. And that is we're tired. I think I sense that students are tired and they're frustrated, particularly as institutions take up stances around anti-racism, around anti-blackness, putting out statements of solidarity without really knowing what those terms mean, without operationalizing as Tia was saying, without really going beyond those statements to say how does that how is it that the work of the institution is going to change? When you say that your institution is taking an anti-racism stance or taking an anti-blackness stance, which many, many institutions did following the summer of the demonstrations that were led by Black Lives Matter. And so I think, you know, students have heard this before. And when we engage in discourses of equity, educational equity, access, opportunity, I'm at an institution where the majority of our students are students of color.

And so I think that our students are really feeling a lot of the frustration around these these terms being just kind of normalized without really understanding all the layers right underneath what we really mean by this and also the actionable outcomes that an institution would then have to engage in order to meet those anti-racist, anti-black stances challenging white supremacy in our institutions. What does that look like? And we're so far away from that that I think that students feel frustrated right around, you know, engaging those conversations with institutions.

Bryan Alexander: I mean, this past year has seen the, you know, the big great awakening following the murder of George Floyd. But at the same time, it's also seen the terrible pandemic which did fall unevenly and horribly, on black and brown populations, more so than whites and others. But that has also crimped the ability of colleges and universities to do almost anything, which is why we've seen so many layoffs, so many furloughs and so many program cuts. *Chronicle Higher Ed* estimated that higher education last year lost upwards of 650,000 workers, which is something that we really, I don't think we have processed. And this is coming on top of an era where American higher ed has already been financially really stressed. So we have the financial resources that are stretched. We also just simply time. So many faculty had to radically learn how to teach online and then to relearn and then try again and iterate and keep improving it. And a lot of staff help them as well. Again, staff that don't get nearly enough recognition, such as instructional designers, educational technologists.

<MUSIC STARTS SOFTLY, PLAY UNDER>

Bryan Alexander: But above all, I think a lot of institutions have been trying really hard to work on something they don't do well, which is listening and listening hard. And when, as Professor Perez Huber mentioned, a lot of people who like to speak feel a little burned out on the speaking. This takes a lot more patience and that will take some learning and some time.

Annet Rangel: During my undergraduate years, I read an interview with Dr. Eve Tuck, an Associate Professor of Critical Race and Indigenous Studies at the University of Toronto.

That's where I first came across this idea that it's not just TALKING about decolonizing curriculums but more so about looking at the concrete actions being made on campuses that actually show we're decolonizing education.

With that in mind, I wanted to ask the authors:

What are some of the innovative strategies that *you've* been seeing or hoping for in order to make sure that students are able to complete their education and ultimately eliminate these equity gaps?

Dr. Brown McNair weighed in first.

<MUSIC RINGS OUT>

Tia Brown McNair: When you're talking about diversifying the faculty, you have Ohio State University and what the commitment that was just made by the leadership to hire not just one, two, three, four, but a significant number of faculty of color. And being bold about that statement, I mean, and saying we are committed to this. So I think that if this is what we say about *equity, talk and equity walk*, we have a lot of institutions that say we want to diversify the faculty. Well, here you have Ohio State University and the leadership there.

I mean, there are so many different ways that institutions can address and should be addressing the equity gaps that students and faculty and anybody in our educational environment are experiencing. There's not one simple answer for an institution. An institution has to do that deep analysis and figure out what is best for them to address inequities and racism at their institution and within their communities and from there, be authentic about it in the work and have levels of accountability.

Lindsay Perez Huber: I think our students are pushing for more than just support right now. They really want to think about the ways that we transform institutions and that, that we create institutions that serve us because they were not created for us and that they understand many of them understand these histories. And so when I think about strategies that would work for students or what students need, I think about what does education look like outside of the structures that we know today?

One thing that this pandemic has shown us is that we never a year ago thought that online schooling on a global scale could work. And it has. I think it gets to something that was mentioned earlier is that this pandemic has really taught us how quickly we can shift and how quickly we can pivot. And so that I think is really hopeful. I think that's really inspiring in terms of how quickly we can change things if we're really pushed to do that.

<MUSIC STARTS UP SOFTLY>

Bryan Alexander: If we step back a little bit, we think about the enormous, enormous, transformative wave that is climate change and our response to it. So looking ahead, 30, 60 years, this is something that's going to rock higher education from the top to the bottom. And among other things, we have to think about that in terms of social justice. We have to make sure that we try to respond with equity and that the damages of first order caused by climate change and second order caused by our responses do not feel unequally minoritized and otherwise marginal populations. A second to think about, and this is where Dr. Perez Huber comes in, is if we think about the major demographic changes that we're facing. One of them is that we are experiencing a decline of our white population and an increase in our Latino population, the Black population staying stable, the indigenous population is staying stable. But the real growth is in the Latino and Hispanic population. And this is one that really does not get nearly enough limelight, doesn't get nearly enough attention. And so, you know, Hispanic serving institutions get to lead the way.

<MUSIC RINGS OUT>

Annet Rangel: Wow, yeah, absolutely. I feel like Dr. Perez Huber has something on her mind.

Lindsay Perez Huber: I hope that higher education becomes a place where all students, including students of color, can come to find critical consciousness, to try to find opportunities for transformation, to find tools to do change. Right? And where where they feel recognized and valued and safe, which a lot of our institutions are not these spaces for many of our

students and thinking kind of outside education can be also a form of healing. Right? So how does higher education think about how we can engage in healing for our students? Some of that comes from learning your histories. Some of that comes from being recognized and valued. Some of that comes from making connections and maintaining connections with community and that being your work as a student. And so there's a couple of things I think that I'm hoping for in terms of what higher education can be one day.

Annet Rangel: Dr. Alexander. What inspires you most about the future of higher education?

Bryan Alexander: This past year, so many, so many colleges and universities struggled mightily. And I mentioned some of these in terms of the pandemic, for example, and financial pressures that we saw enrollment drop about three percent last fall. And with all of that, with some of the nightmarish aspects of the past year, we recommitted to two things. We recommitted to teaching and learning, and we're committed to racial justice. And I'm awestruck that we could do that in the middle of a devastating pandemic and political chaos and economic catastrophe. And for higher education, we don't always commit well to teaching and learning, shall we say, and we haven't always committed well to racial justice. The fact that we did those things, I think that fills me with a lot of hope.

<STINGER>

Annet Rangel: Dr. Lindsay Perez Huber....Dr. Bryan Alexander and Dr. Tia Brown McNair

The work of these authors informs student success strategies and guides the professional development agenda of faculty and administration nationwide...

These are the authors you want on *your* summer reading list. But what are *they* reading right now?

Here's Dr. Brown McNair...

Tia Brown McNair: Well, I can tell you one, that I am going to and I can't wait to start this weekend. I don't have time during the week to do. I mean, because I'm always I mean, that's the difficult part. I'm going to read Heather McGhee's, *The Sum of Us* and I, it just came out. You can't even get a hard copy right now because it's on backorder. And she's the daughter of Dr. Gail Christopher, who's the visionary and architect of the truth, racial healing and transformation effort. But she's also a scholar in her own right. And so I'm looking forward to this weekend as I'm on my way to my son's baseball tournament to dig into *The Sum of Us*.

Annet Rangel: Absolutely. Dr. Perez Huber, what are you currently reading?

Lindsay Perez Huber: Yeah, so I am finally getting to finish a book that I started a while ago. It's called *We Want to Do More than Survive* by Bettina Love. And it's about abolitionist teaching and freedom, what she calls freedom dreaming and getting to many of the things that we talked

about in this conversation about futurities and possibilities. What do we look forward to? Where do we find joy? I think going back to your question Annet I think is one of these healing books right. Where you're seeing and you're and your feeling between Bettina Love's story, the way that she tells it in this book is just so powerful. I also think that this book in particular would be great for higher ed administrators to read. Dr. Alexander was talking about demographic shifts in higher education that are happening in schools, of course, and then in higher education. And I think that as our student population is increasingly more diverse, our administration is still mostly white. So what does that mean? And there's a chapter in Bettina Love's book where she talks about moving away from the concept of allyship, which really just means cooperation to this concept of being co-conspirators. Right? So being a co-conspirator means that as well as a white co-conspirator, I'm willing to give up some of my power to lift-up people of color. So what does that look like? And I would love to have that conversation with higher ed administrators to think about what does that look like in their role in higher ed particularly.

Annet Rangel: Wonderful. Dr. Alexander, got to ask the same question for you.

Bryan Alexander: Well, I did want to grumble at Dr. Perez Huber for stealing some of my thunder because we were used to Dr. Love's book in our foundation's class in the Georgetown Learning Design Technology Program last year. And it was very, very powerful, very moving, very rich. And it really, really contribute a lot to our students understanding and this played out in the subsequent academic year.

I guess the book I'm reading right now is *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer. Keep in mind that I'm working on my book on climate change and higher education. So that's a lot of what my bookshelves look like. *Braiding Sweetgrass* is a fascinating book about a botanist who is also an Indigenous woman who once described her approach to the natural world by braiding these two together. And it's gorgeously written, profound meditations on everything from reciprocity to how we inhabit spaces, to how we socialize, think of memory. And it's just rich with insights. It's just a lovely book. I'm finding myself slowing down as I read it because I want to savor more of it.

[THEME MUSIC STARTS TO PLAY]

Annet Rangel: Innovation stems from collaboration. People coming together to identify the problem, discuss new ideas, and figure out solutions.

Higher Education leaders like our authors:

Dr. Lindsay Perez Huber...

Dr. Tia Brown McNair...

and Dr. Bryan Alexander...are on the ground facilitating research...innovating how we can re-think higher education...

Conversations like the one we hosted today are important and necessary. And we need to continue to have them if we want colleges and universities to move forward, and become a place where all students feel like they can succeed.

[MUSIC BEAT]

***FINAL EPISODE PROMO:* Our next episode is our final one of the season and it's going to be about all the lessons we've learned during this extremely unusual year.**

We've gathered some of the most influential systemwide leaders to talk about how a year of crisis has... in actuality...led to reflection and growth.

You won't want to miss it.

[CREDITS - OUTRO PROMO]

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[THEME MUSIC RINGS OUT]