

Higher Ed Rewired

Season 2, Episode 1

Mind the Gap: Going Beyond Diversity and Rethinking Inclusion

Host: Annet Rangel

Guests: Eric Felix, Frank Harris and Cynthia Olivo.

Whereas there is ample evidence of persistent equity gaps across the education pipeline, successfully closing the gap has thus far eluded higher education leaders and policy makers. What do we know about what works, emerging best practices, and why equity gaps are so stubborn?

Higher Ed Rewired spoke with postsecondary education faculty researchers, Dr. Frank Harris III and Dr. Eric Felix of San Diego State University, to discuss their research and recommendations on the work required in closing equity gaps. We also dive into the work at Pasadena City College that has driven institutional change by going beyond diversity and rethinking inclusion for their 27,000 students.

Dr. Eric Felix, Assistant Professor of Administration, Rehabilitation, and Postsecondary Education, College of Education, San Diego State University

Dr. Frank Harris, Professor, Postsecondary Education, and Co-Director of the Community College Equity Assessment Lab (CCEAL), San Diego State University

Dr. Cynthia Olivo, Assistant Superintendent / Vice President of Student Services, Pasadena City College

COLD OPEN

[MUSIC]

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: My grandparents were born here in the 1920s, but they weren't permitted to go to college through laws of segregation.

Annet Rangel: This is Dr. Cynthia Olivo from Pasadena City College or PCC, a community college in Southern California

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: My 10 aunts and uncles participated in a K-12 system that punished them for speaking Spanish in school. My mother experienced blatant racism from her peers. I'm 3rd Gen, born in this country. First gen to go to

college. And it's probably because by the time you get to 3rd Gen, your native language is not predominant. And, you know, there's just so much that occurs by third gen.

Annet Rangel: 100 years ago, racist policies legally BARRED Dr. Olivo's grandparents from attending college.

But, today, she's the Vice President of Student Affairs at PCC.

Her job is to help her college become *more* inclusive, *more* diverse, and *more* equitable.

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: understanding that history, it should make somebody politically active. And I would say over the past four to five years, I have led a student equity for the college. And what that means is making sure that our institution is being culturally responsive and my personal mission ever since I was at the CSU system as an undergrad has been to focus on racial equity.

Annet Rangel: Through her work and that of her colleagues, PCC is home to a student body that is more than half Latinx.

[THEME MUSIC STARTS]

[Welcome Intro:

Higher Ed Rewired is a production of the California State University. The largest, most diverse four-year public university system in the country. Each episode looks at exciting innovations taking place across the Cal-State -- Transforming the landscape of higher education for the 23 campuses and half a million students.]

Annet Rangel: Welcome to the second season of Higher Ed Rewired.

I'm Annet Rangel, your host for season 2.

<BEAT>

[Sound from BLM protests]

Say her name, Breonna Taylor Say her name, Breonna Taylor
Say his name, George Floyd Say his name, George Floyd

Our nation is going through a reckoning

...to address the wrongs of institutional racism...

....at every level.

....including college campuses.

[Montage of three news-sounding clips]

Diversity has become a challenge in almost all aspects of American life

For decades, colleges and universities have defined diversity by the number of students of color on their campuses

College can be a pathway out of poverty, but race does play a role in the opportunities that students have when it comes to higher education.

But nowhere has the conflict become more intense than at our colleges and universities.

But this struggle...it's not new...

In this episode, the question is, how does higher ed go BEYOND “diversity”?

How can institutions rethink “inclusion”?

How do we cultivate an environment where those students who have traditionally been left out of the system ... get an equal opportunity to succeed?

[STINGER MUSIC]

These aren't small fixes or window dressing.

These are *bold* ideas that are trying to dismantle centuries of white supremacy that have been baked into our institutions, our faculties AND our student bodies.

Colleges and universities need an update so that historically under-served communities aren't just admitted.... but graduate... and thrive.

One approach to acknowledging problems and creating new strategies is the CSU's Graduation Initiative 2025.

It's a system-wide effort looking at all facets of the undergraduate and graduate experience to better prepare all students for a lifetime of achievement.

But you can't expect to close equity gaps simply by inviting more diverse groups to the table. We've learned you gotta be proactive about addressing all students' needs.

[Music ends]

And that... can be really tough.

[NEWS CLIP ABOUT AFFIRMATIVE ACTION]

How the nation's largest university system may be transformed now that its affirmative action program is going to be ended.

Annet Rangel: Affirmative action and the huge upswell against it in the 90s and 2000s had a major effect on how we talk about diversity, race, inclusion... everything.

Dr. Eric Felix: You know, we've grown up under proposition 209

This is Dr. Eric Felix from San Diego State University.

He earned his graduate degree examining racial policies in education.

Annet Rangel: Today, he works with colleges and universities to create programs that directly address racial inequalities.

Dr. Eric Felix: the bigger thing that I've seen in my work is the rhetoric of Proposition 209. So not just what's written in the law now in our Constitution, but what's grown out of proportion rhetoric that like, oh, no, you can't talk about race.

You remember California's Prop 209, right?

It was the 1996 voter approved ban on considering race, sex, and ethnicity, in the areas of public employment, public contracting, and *public education*.

Essentially, California's ban on affirmative action.

But, here's the thing.

When you *actually* read the language of Prop 209 ...

you'll find it places restrictions on *hiring* staff and faculty and *admitting* students

...

but it doesn't say *anything* about equity programs on campus.

Dr. Eric Felix: for many, you know, there's, there's a reluctance to be race conscious and develop race specific solutions because they believe they will be breaking the law, in that sense, and that's a real thing that myself and other colleagues have experienced when we work with faculty and staff and administrator in terms of developing more race conscious efforts on campus

Annet Rangel: But that's not the case?

Dr. Eric Felix: You've already admitted the students. There's no real barrier to developing retention and success programs based on race, and there's no big issue to that. But I think what happens is that we've grown to kind of shy away from racial discourse. If we are more race conscious and not just race conscious, but also just aware and acknowledge that there are structural barriers for so many students and we try to address the structural barriers, we can be more successful in implementing policies that achieves its intent and makes an impact with the limited dollars that we have to do so.

Annet Rangel: One powerful tool, according to Dr. Felix, is curriculum designed to help students see how race and social inequities directly affect them. He's a big proponent of ethnic studies for all.

Dr. Eric Felix: I think the first thing is just recognizing the power that ethnic studies as a discipline has in education. You see it in K-12 and in higher education that students that enroll and take ethnic studies courses not only learn more about themselves in a relational way, which is important, right? It's important to understand each other as individuals, but you start to really remove the veil in terms of structural historical inequities. You start to explore big, big issues like what does settler colonialism mean? What does racism mean? Right. What does it mean for us to live in a gendered and patriarchal society?

Annet Rangel: Campuses today are focusing on ethnic studies, as well as a wider set of social justice curricula that looks at the history of economic injustice, for example, or structural barriers to immigrants over time.

Dr. Eric Felix: It's important to recognize that for the last 20, 30, 40 years, there have been these severe inequities based on race, and we need policies and we need solutions that are not generalized because, you know, generalized solutions will never address racialized problems.

[Transition music]

Dr. Frank Harris III: I grew up in the South in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans. I spent my formative years there

This is Dr. Frank Harris III.

and I happened to attend schools that were very segregated in many respects. So there were schools that were very under-resourced.

He's co-director of the Community College Equity Assessment Laboratory at San Diego State University. It's a national research lab supporting community colleges, helping students that the system has historically left behind.

Dr. Frank Harris III: But what we had is we had teachers who all of whom were Black and who did some things that we know to be important in the educational experiences and trajectories of students. So they believed in us. They validated us and I think what those formative experiences did for me in education was just creating a disposition that allowed me to really thrive and really enjoy being a learner

Annet Rangel: Dr. Harris believes that the key to *inclusion and equity* on campuses is twofold: admit students of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds AND to embrace what he calls "equity mindedness"

Dr. Frank Harris III: Diversity, inclusion, equity. I think there are terms that are related, but they certainly tend to get conflated. And the way that I like to think about diversity is it's about the representation.

So you can have diversity, but you may not necessarily have inclusion. You have to be intentional if you want folks to feel included in space.

And then equity, i would say, it's about outcomes. First and foremost, it's about does everyone have what they need in order to benefit from even being in this space? So you can have diversity and not have equity. You can have a critical mass of students of color, but they may not have what they need to to really benefit from the opportunity of being enrolled at an institution.

Annet Rangel: That seems like almost a re-arranging of how we think about diversity, students, and success.

Dr. Frank Harris III: equity-mindedness at its core, it is a mindset that should inform the actions we take as educators. We have to look at inequity, not as exclusively a student success issue. We also have to look at inequity and see it as an institutional success issue.

We have to see students' lived experiences and their identities not as deficits, but we actually have to see those as assets, things that we can actually leverage to influence their success and then, how do I bring equity mightiness into every space that I have the opportunity and privilege to be a part of in education. So it's not just about what I do in my classroom, but it's also about what I do and what I see at department meetings or on hiring committees, or on curriculum committee meetings or in budget meetings, and so forth.

We have to really deeply care about students, care about who they are, and not in a casual sense. We care about them as people. Right. We have to really see the humanity in every single student and we have to deeply care about their success.

Annet Rangel: As a country we've been struggling a lot with historical and institutional racism.

Dr. Frank Harris III: Folks are starting to recognize that education in the United States is rooted in, committed to and has always prioritized white supremacy and that it's a system that doesn't work for the vast majority of people.

[Transition music starts]

This is really a systemic issue. So, the same students who were not well served and who are disproportionately impacted in education, are also not well served in the healthcare system, they are not well served in the criminal justice system, in the workforce.

Equity mindedness contributes positively to student success, particularly for students who have been underrepresented, underserved, minoritized and marginalized in education.

[Transition plays for a measure or two and continues]

Annet Rangel: So how do all these big ideas play out in classrooms and administration buildings?

This brings us back to Dr. Cynthia Olivo, who we heard from at the top of the episode. She has dedicated her academic and professional career to putting race at the forefront of diversity and inclusion efforts on her campus, Pasadena City College.

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: Yes, we want our laws and policies to be in line with social justice and racial equity, and we also want to change hearts and minds.

For the past 7 years, Pasadena City College has been a *finalist* at the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. They pick just TEN finalists from over 1,000 colleges in America. It's basically the Oscars for community colleges.

The selection process is rigorous ... looking at achievements in four areas: teaching and learning, certificate and degree completion, workforce success, and equitable outcomes for students of color and low-income students.

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: At my particular college, we have 27,000 students. Of our 27,000 students, 51% percent are LatinX, 4% percent are African-American and 29% are Asian and Pacific Islander. So essentially our college is like 75% students of color.

Annet Rangel: Wow, those numbers say a lot about diversity on your campus, but at what rate do these students persist and advance to the next phase of their career or academic journey?

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: When we disaggregate our data for outcomes, we want to make sure that all of our students are achieving at parity. You know, when you look at White and Asian, for example, students and you see, let's say 57 percent completion rate does follow through and carry over for African-American LatinX students, for example. And I'm really proud that we have closed racial equity gaps for LatinX students by 10 percentage points in less than four years.

We've tripled the number of African-American students who've earned an associate degree. That's what racial equity's about. It's focusing on race and it's being race conscious.

Annet Rangel: Can you tell us a little bit about how you were able to achieve this level of progress?

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: We've created this culture of inquiry where we're inquiring into our practices and then we change our practices. And it's everything from the micro level to the macro level. Right. It's the hiring processes. It's everybody taking responsibility for changing. And they're doing it. They're not waiting for this lengthy bureaucratic process. They just get it done.

Annet Rangel: Dr. Olivo's team has worked extensively with Dr. Frank Harris III and the Community College Equity Assessment Lab. Together, they looked at the efforts made by PCC to be more inclusive and equitable.

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: So we have built into our infrastructure people who can lead professional development based on racial equity.

And we also have created communities of practice so that new faculty work together all year long in this new faculty seminar focusing on how to adopt practices that are culturally relevant and responsive to our students

What I'll tell you happens now is those teachers who have adopted our equity minded framework. They themselves are flexible with students. And this culture of care in the classroom module is flexibility with assignments, making sure that you have listed resources in the syllabus, connecting individually and personally with each student, knowing students by their names

Annet Rangel: I don't know I just feel like creating a culture of care amongst faculty that just doesn't really come easy, how are you doing that on your campus?

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: Yes, our new faculty meet every other Friday for four hours and so we get nearly 100 percent participation. I believe it's because from the recruitment, selection and hiring process of faculty at our college, it is clearly understood that our mission and intentional ethos and core of our college is about hiring folks that are truly invested in realizing racial equity.

Annet Rangel: Absolutely, can you tell me a little bit about what is being discussed and taught during the seminar?

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: It addresses how to be an equity minded teacher. So in practice, you know how to develop your syllabus so that it's an equity minded tool. And one of our faculty leaders is the person who wrote her dissertation on equity minded syllabus design and so she teaches the faculty how to migrate from utilizing your syllabus as kind of this archaic, scary, contract that explains all the rules about a class. And instead, you transform your syllabus into a helpful resource guide, that signals to students that you care about them, that you're creating a welcoming and warm, inviting, tone with the first official document that the students are receiving from you.

Annet Rangel: Do you think these changes make a difference in students' lives?

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: I'll have to tell you, one of the best remarks I've heard a student make recently. Well, a student, he said he enrolled at PCC maybe eight years ago and he was pursuing construction.

He heard that we were doing an exhibit to honor Jaime Escalante, the teacher from Stand and Deliver. This student came to the exhibit and he said he just felt like he could become an engineer, you know. So he went from having this goal of construction to then realizing his true goal was to pursue engineering.

[Transition music starts]

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: And when he re-enrolled after that exhibit, he said, you know, I felt a difference. I felt like PCC had become this place where it's like when I met a family party and I'm getting hugs from my tios and my tias my aunts and my uncles and everyone's there to cheer you on and support you and make sure you have what you need to make it. So that to me, is the best kind of feedback that helps describe this transition we've made from being really transactional to being transformational.

Annet Rangel: Okay, so we now understand that it is super important for legislators to actually address race when crafting higher ed equity policies ...

that diversity doesn't mean just admitting students of color

.... You have to create and implement a system within the institution that sets up ALL students for success in college ...

But the question of HOW to right the wrongs of the past and address the equity gap on campus... is daunting.

So, here are five concepts to consider taken from each of our higher education equity advocates today:

One: A commitment to equity requires an investment from the entire institution

Dr. Eric Felix: In order to serve students more equitably, it requires the entire institution to rethink and reshape their practices from the way that you matriculate students and admit them, the way that you create your orientation programs to how you teach students in the classroom to how you provide support services within and around the classroom. It requires re-imagining of the structures, of the policies, of programs and practices that you currently have.

And that is a lot of work. Fundamentally shifting your beliefs as a leader, as a faculty member, as a staff member, that every student, especially racially minoritized students, can achieve success on your campus and should experience equitable rates of transfer of degree completion or anything else that they aspire to achieve.

Second thing: Your Policies, Practices and procedures really matter.

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: We brought in an expert on cultural competence in hiring and she created a four-hour teaching and learning session where all of us learned how to make the best hiring decision based on identifying cultural competence in candidates, the cultural competence necessary to work effectively with community college students who are we know the majority students of color, African-American, LatinX first gen college students from low-income backgrounds.

Third: Diversity isn't just about the numbers.

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: I think it's important to understand the demographics of the people who live in the neighborhoods and communities surrounding our colleges who could potentially enroll at our college versus who is. And then, of course, looking at who is enrolled and making sure that of the experiences that our students have, that they feel validated and valued and that ultimately they're achieving their goals at the same rates.

Four: Be intentional.

Dr. Cynthia Olivo: Don't just do something and hope or wish or think, maybe it'll make a difference. Ultimately, it has to create this warm, welcoming, affirming environment for the students. And you'll know if it's working or not, because you'll hear patterns of their experiences, as well as, you'll see it in your outcomes data if you're making a difference or not.

And finally, know the history and LISTEN to your faculty, staff, students and communities of color.

Dr. Frank Harris III: Again, when we're talking about education, criminal justice, health care, employment, policing, it's a systemic issue that is rooted in and advances white supremacy. And, so we're going to have to be ready for that as educators. And when I say ready for it, I mean ready to be good partners, ready to listen, ready to learn. And we're going to have to build our capacity to not just be equity minded educators, but we're going to have to also be race conscious. We're going to have to be better at understanding how certain populations, particularly communities that are minoritized, are not well served by what we do and how we've done it for decades. You can't be neutral.

This is also an important time to listen and learn. Listen to your Black colleagues. Listen to your Black students. Learn from them. When your Black colleagues and Black students say, hey, this is what happened to me. Believe them. Don't question them.

[OUTRO MUSIC FADES IN]

At the top of the episode we talked about how higher ed, like the rest of the country is going through a reckoning ... America is only getting more diverse and colleges and universities have the opportunity to be leaders in creating a more equitable society.

Today, there are more Black, Latinx, Asian and Native students than ever before. As our campuses become more diverse, higher education policies must follow suit.

And the key is *listening* ... to students, faculty and administrators ... making sure to evaluate ourselves ... so our programs are actually doing the things we're setting out to do.

[CREDITS]

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