

Recycling Incompetence:

A Reflection on Cultural Competency Development in Graduate Preparation



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I am a graduate student in a higher education administration and policy program—a future administrator, if you will—who is not required to develop cultural competency prior to graduation.

My colleagues and I are able to discuss issues of access and success for minority and underrepresented students using theoretical, philosophical, and even moral perspectives. Likewise, many of my peers in graduate programs across the country can analyze policy, evaluate programs, and make recommendations related to equity in education.

Unfortunately, many will also conflate social justice with diversity, mistaking accommodation for inclusion. We tout our liberal use of gender-affirming language, throw around buzz words like dialogue, and have double standards when it comes to expectations of students compared to our own.

The problem is many of my colleagues also believe that we live in a post-racial society. They say things like, “the only race that matters is the human race.”

Some think social justice is a “trend.”

Some do not understand that oppression is interconnected; that our identities are not a math equation; and that equality is not equity.

Some do not think it is necessary to intentionally carve out time and space to understand students of color’s experiences, their developmental needs, challenges, and successes.

They think it is okay to consume and trivialize people’s cultures and history at theme parties.

Likewise, some of my professors think it is okay to talk about the history of colonial colleges without talking about their horrendous colonial history.

Some of my professors and colleagues think, “Students are being too sensitive,” when they are micro-aggressed and macro-aggressed upon in class, in their residence halls, and on the street.

Some will alarmingly respond, “This whole PC thing has gone too far, and I can’t keep up.” “Freedom of speech and academic freedom are at stake here.” “We are being coddled.”

Sadly, in programs across the country, this is how many of us prepare to become administrators and faculty members.

Last week, five of my colleagues showed up to listen to or be present while hundreds of Black students pled for their safety, right for a dignified educational experience, and equitable treatment on campus. There are roughly 40 people enrolled in my program and cohort.

I wonder if the rest of them care. Maybe.

Yet, they think having one three-hour session talking about the “challenges of diversity” and the “changing landscape of higher education” means we have excavated ourselves from our complicity in systems of oppression; that we have exonerated ourselves from our responsibility to uproot a system that continues to oppress, suppress, and diminish the livelihood, potential, and futures of Black students and other students of color on college campuses everywhere.

We are told everyday we are the future leaders of higher education. And, the reality is, we are. I can very easily see the Claremont McKenna College/Yale/Miz-zou/[insert institution name] emails coming from most of my peers. In fact, I have heard variations of them time and time again.

And, unfortunately, it is not entirely their fault.

I want to blame programs for their carelessness and irresponsibility. I want to blame the systems at play for making us complicit, docile. I want to blame institutions for not making cultural competency a critical

component for the preparation of future educators, administrators, and faculty.

But at some point, we have to take responsibility too.

You see, the wave of student protest and activism on college campuses across the country is much larger than a single offense, individual, or institution. The systems within which we are training administrators, educators, faculty, and staff are broken. It is time we start holding our peers, our programs, and ourselves accountable.

No one is exempt from this work. Providing adequate training, education, and critical engagement within and across difference is the first step in preparing graduate students for entry into campuses that desperately needs transformative change. Beyond learning the language of diversity, graduate students must be equipped with the information, knowledge, and skills necessary to interrogate and challenge the systems they are bound to be working within. Perhaps then we can begin to interrupt the cycle of ill preparation of future practitioners.

Institutions must also work to remediate current administrators and faculty. This can no longer be a reactionary measure to student demands. It is time for administration and faculty leadership to develop strategic plans for members of a campus community to interrogate themselves and their socialized biases. Doing so allows us to then develop a shared mission of supporting educational equity, cultivating knowledge around the experiences of marginalized students, and developing the skills necessary to facilitate a truly inclusive campus community.

Enhancing the experiences of students of color, improving campus climate, and achieving educational equity has to be a multipronged and multidirectional process that involves all members of the campus community. None of this is novel.

The cycle of producing and re-producing incompetence needs to stop, and it is our responsibility to call for it. If we are to truly value Black life, if we are to truly commit to justice and equity in all aspects of higher education, and if we believe we are responsible for the future of this mess, then we must do better. The question of how this all can be implemented has been thoroughly studied and corroborated by scholars and practitioners time and time again.

What are we waiting for?

In Solidarity,
Khaled Ismail



Image by Justin S. Campbell