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Universities Should Look in the Mirror

Colleges have excellent faculty who are contributing new knowledge on equity and inclusion, but sadly that knowledge is rarely applied to the institutions themselves, writes Laurel Smith-Doerr.

By [Laurel Smith-Doerr \(/users/laurel-smith-doerr\)](/users/laurel-smith-doerr) // September 15, 2021

One of the first executive orders that President Biden signed on [advancing racial equity](https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/) (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/>) acknowledges that “advancing equity requires a systematic approach to embedding fairness in decision-making processes.” It exhorts government agencies to “recognize and work to redress inequities in their policies and programs that serve as barriers to equal opportunity.”

That executive order also gives us an opportunity to make substantial improvements in addressing systemic racism and sexism in the academy -- but only if we make changes in the organizational structure of our institutions. At present, campuses are missing a chance to use our scientific expertise to get our own houses in order.

I am a sociologist who studies equity in scientific organizations and leads a National Science Foundation ADVANCE program for faculty gender equity. My research and leadership of that program have led me to the conclusion that we must establish internally facing research and development units on campuses that allow universities to look in the mirror on equity. R&D for diversity, equity and inclusion can develop and integrate cutting-edge knowledge into our programs and policies. Critically, such R&D units must be at once independent from the main administrative structure yet also have the resources and power to infuse successful new ideas throughout the institution.

The R&D function I propose is different from offices and units that run the programs for faculty and diversity, equity and inclusion that [most colleges and universities have had since 2006](https://www.nadohe.org/) (<https://www.nadohe.org/>). Leaders and diversity officers whose full-time job is to educate and implement diversity policies and programs are fulfilling a vital function. But we also need to know what works and what does not, informed by science.

We do not just need more research. By definition, all self-respecting colleges and universities have excellent social science faculty working in departments and centers who are contributing new basic knowledge on equity and inclusion. Sadly, however, that knowledge is rarely applied to the institutions themselves.

What we see is a divide on campuses between the research and practice aspects of diversity, equity and inclusion. This “silo” problem is [well-known](https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/plenary_sessions.pdf) (https://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/plenary_sessions.pdf) in higher education and not unique to any one institution. My own experience at the University of Massachusetts may help demonstrate some of the problems, as well as the potential for applying R&D to each institution’s specific DEI initiatives. Funding through the National Science Foundation ADVANCE program has allowed the university to develop some functions of R&D for our DEI efforts -- at least, during the five years of the award.

Consider faculty mentoring. Starting from existing literature on mutual mentoring, we have investigated how well faculty peer mentoring has been working on our campus. Focus groups with 85 faculty, in groups organized by gender and rank, [revealed a gender gap \(https://www.umass.edu/advance/sites/default/files/inline-files/Collaboration_and_Gender_Equity_among_Academic_Scientists.pdf\)](https://www.umass.edu/advance/sites/default/files/inline-files/Collaboration_and_Gender_Equity_among_Academic_Scientists.pdf). Men faculty members more often reported informal mentoring support for establishing effective research collaborations. Women faculty more often reported either not wanting to burden their assigned mentors or being given well-meaning but ultimately bad advice to avoid collaboration altogether.

The results of such research allowed us to develop programming logic to address the gender gap in three needed support areas: resources, relationships and recognition, or what we call the R3 model. As part of that model, we've distributed resources through small mutual mentoring grants to support innovative ideas for building mentoring communities. We've also encouraged relationship skill building by training faculty members in peer mentoring. And we've provided recognition to outstanding faculty peer mentors through annual ADVANCE mentoring awards. We continue to assess the effectiveness of these programs through evaluation as part of the R&D mind-set.

But the efforts of an independent R&D unit can only be as good as its integration with the existing university administrative structure. On our campus, we have had meaningful partnerships with the administrators in the provost's and chancellor's offices, including colleagues in DEI leadership. Integration of the ADVANCE R&D function into the institution allows for the adoption of innovative practices based on research.

Based in part on ADVANCE research, the provost's office implemented a new hiring policy that requires all departments to create a faculty mentoring plan as a condition for each new hire. To meet this requirement, ADVANCE works with the Office of Faculty Development and other campus units to provide resources for departments to create more effective and equitable mentoring plans.

While we have seen some successes from our R&D model, a major challenge is maintaining inroads when it comes to diversity, equity and inclusion. Our grant will end in a few years. The question is how to incorporate an R&D model that will sustain long-lasting change.

Can an innovative R&D unit work in a bureaucratic higher education institution? Yes, it can. But deciding how it can be sustained must be a core commitment of any campus that is serious about diversity, equity and inclusion.

A place for American institutions to start building their research and development for DEI is by looking into existing nationwide programs for related funding and guidance. Federal science agencies are supporting research and programs for equity, including the [NSF ADVANCE Institutional Transformation \(https://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=5383\)](https://www.nsf.gov/funding/pgm_summ.jsp?pims_id=5383) funding mechanism. And universities can find guidance on structuring initial data gathering efforts through the American Association for the Advancement of Science [SEA Change program \(https://seachange.aaas.org/\)](https://seachange.aaas.org/).

As with all R&D start-up efforts, the challenge is sustaining success over the long term. Establishing faculty-led research that informs institutional change -- and keeping that research and development for DEI units going as long as possible -- will pay dividends in more effective approaches to the ultimate goal of equity on campus.

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