

In a time of deep opposition to social justice initiatives, Ocampo and Rivera's *Building Inclusive Campuses* offers an important rebuttal to the backlash against diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Articulating the value and criticality of cultivating inclusive environments for adult learning and development in higher education is the persistent push forward that our students, staff, faculty, and academic administrators need to uphold a fundamental covenant we make upon entering the halls of academia. The idea that all are welcome and worthy of regard and understanding shapes not only the educational landscape, but more widely a society, a world, for which we prepare our graduates to live and lead. This book provides the permission structure through theory, praxis, and an evidence base to continue this work, despite this temporary interruption.

—**Wendi S. Williams, PhD**, Owner and Principal, The Well Consultation Services; 2026 President, American Psychological Association

In *Building Inclusive Campuses*, editors and thought leaders Ocampo and Rivera provide concrete inclusion strategies that are enhanced by their knowledge of liberation psychology, trauma-informed education, and sustainable development. Every campus leader committed to equity and belonging will benefit from this thoughtful resource.

—**Thema Bryant, PhD**, coauthor of *The Antiracism Handbook: Practical Tools to Shift Your Mindset and Uproot Racism in Your Life and Community*; Professor, Graduate School of Education and Psychology, Pepperdine University, Los Angeles, CA; 2023 President, American Psychological Association

A must-read for anyone working in higher education! This timely and impactful book speaks to the evolving landscape of higher education, offering essential insights into the complex challenges faced on campuses today. It provides critical information for advancing inclusion, mental health, and student success, particularly for students of color, at both the structural and systemic levels.

—**Debra M. Kawahara, PhD**, 2025 President, American Psychological Association; Interim Academic Dean, California School of Professional Psychology, Alliant University, San Diego

This is a timely and important contribution to higher education. What makes this book compelling is the authors' ability to combine passion and practicality. Grounded in a thoughtful, systems-focused lens, it not only illuminates the experiences and needs of students of color but also provides data-informed strategies and actionable tools for educators, administrators, and campus partners. It is an engaging and deeply useful resource for anyone committed to moving beyond good intentions and toward meaningful, responsive, and collaborative support for student success.

—**Meeta Kumar, PhD**, Assistant Vice President for Student Wellness,
University of Chicago, Chicago, IL

This book gets at something most campus mental health resources miss—that student well-being isn't just about counseling services; it's about transforming everything from our leadership mindset to what happens inside our classrooms. Ocampo and Rivera don't let institutions off the hook by pathologizing students; instead, they show us how to build campuses where students of color can move from stressed and depressed to genuinely engaged and doing their best work.

—**Hollie M. Chessman, PhD**, Director and Principal Program Officer,
American Council on Education (ACE)

This text serves as a robust resource for educators committed to creating inclusive, trauma-informed, and healing-centered spaces for students. This book provides extensive evidence to support the need for transformative practices in higher education as well as numerous examples of what these practices could look like on our campuses.

—**Jayne K. Sommers, PhD**, Associate Professor, Educational Leadership,
University of St. Thomas, Minneapolis, MN

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INTRODUCTION

Why Supporting Students of Color Matters

CARLOTA OCAMPO

There is no work more important than creating environments where people of color can learn, grow, and thrive—especially in areas where they have been historically excluded. This includes academic environments, foundational to success and flourishing across the lifespan. This text takes a trauma-informed approach to creating campus environments that center well-being, including transforming programs, policies, processes, and student services—in short, making equity and excellence in mental health and wellness a strategic priority all through the higher education experience. The theories, praxes, and tools in this text can guide academic leaders, administrators, counselors, advisors, faculty, staff, and all who are engaged in student learning and growth in making at least one change, one change at a time, or a holistic transformation to promote the student of color well-being necessary to persist and thrive. School, consulting, and organizational psychologists as well as other education professionals tasked with improving academic structures can likewise use the frameworks described in these pages on which to base their

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Building Inclusive Campuses: Promoting Mental Health, Wellness, and Success for Students of Color, C. Ocampo and D. P. Rivera (Editors)

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reforms. In this text, a set of academic leaders who are experts in designing trauma-informed environments author chapters that present tested initiatives centered in both theory and praxis that show results.

Creating these environments is social justice work. Human and civil rights have slowly advanced over the long course of history, but progress is not linear (Roser, 2024). Higher education is a key global indicator of the social mobility and equity that supports expanding rights and overall wellness (Cao et al., 2025). In the United States, however, equitable access to a higher education remains a promise unfulfilled: More than 50 years after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, metrics show persistent gaps on achievement and wellness for college students of color. Advancing inclusive excellence and attending to mental health and well-being for these students is an imperative, especially at times when the linearity of progress is interrupted. This text is one tool in the continued commitment to transforming campus environments to achieve equity, diversity, inclusion, and access (EDIA), especially in challenging times.

Part I, “The Problem Is Us, Not ‘Them’: Transforming Leadership, Policy, and Systems,” defines the fundamental issue both theoretically and empirically and shifts its locus to the quality of the environment and not the perceived deficits of the students. Chapter 1 asks education practitioners to examine ways in which students are blamed and penalized for systemic failure and to reassess the deficit model, which attributes failure to students’ internal characteristics rather than the external social conditions that consistently produce the same results. Instead, academic leaders are asked to assume the responsibility of transforming environments to center belonging, intellectual safety, and mental health equity. This text shifts from asking “What is wrong with the students?” to “What is wrong with higher education?” and considers how organizational design and delivery have barred historically excluded students from advancing. Chapter 2 discusses data from the Healthy Minds Study so that readers may understand the scope of the problem, and Chapter 3 presents tested examples of change management from the Excellence in Mental Health on Campus initiative to offer some structural remedies.

Part II, “Inside the Curriculum: Inclusive Excellence and Belongingness Create Educational Impact,” explores tested models and examples for transforming the learning experience to focus on belonging and building student strengths through curricular reform, caucusing, and culturally responsive initiatives, among other techniques. Chapter 4 shows how a curricular transformation revitalized student outcomes in the sciences. Chapters 5 and 6 describe how pedagogies of belonging support access and excellence and include practical examples. Chapter 7 demonstrates how counselors can

partner with academic and student affairs to embed culturally responsive programs directly into the student experience in ways that shift resources rather than require additional expense.

Part III, “Transforming Classroom Experiences: From Stressed and Depressed to Engaged, Energized, and Doing the Best,” digs into the classroom and campus interpersonal experiences and looks at what faculty need to continue this important and invigorating but sometimes exhausting work. Chapter 8 provides practical advice on accountability for microaggressions. Chapter 9 discusses navigating difficult conversations in the classroom and recognizing and referring students in distress, and Chapter 10 recommends self-care for faculty and academics with just-in-time support for educators engaged with students on a daily basis.

In Part IV, “Future Directions: What’s Next and What’s Needed,” the authors of Chapter 11 invite readers to coimagine a future where sustainable, well-funded mental health programs for students of color are uplifted in institutional strategic plans. This section also discusses barriers to implementation that may arise when social commitment to EDIA wanes and the linearity of progress is interrupted and how these challenges can be framed as opportunities for creative intervention. The bottom line: When students of color and historically excluded students thrive, campuses thrive.

Some chapters in this volume use the term *historically excluded* to denote racially and ethnically minoritized people. This term more precisely and accurately describes the experience of those assigned minority status and better explains their systemic outcomes than a label like “minorities.” Language has power. Societies choose who to minoritize (and construct the experiential sequelae of “the minority”) as well as who to center as normative in systems of power and control. Language can either reify that construct of the minority or elucidate the mechanisms by which a hegemonic group maintains social control. This text chooses the latter.

In the United States, the construct of the minority is racialized. Historical exclusion means that race often covaries with income level, social status, and being first generation in college. Like many global cultures, the United States also minoritizes diverse gender expression, sexuality, and class. This text focuses on students of color, but many of the initiatives described herein can be adapted for other minoritized or intersectional groups. Note, though, that while this text upholds values of diversity and promotes thriving for students of color (and intersectional identity) generally, it is also explicitly antiracist and directly addresses anti-Blackness, the core underpinning much of the discriminatory behavior and systematic oppression of people of color in America today.

WHY THIS TEXT NOW: DIVERSITY ROLLBACKS ARE NOT NEW, BUT THE RESISTANCE REMAINS STRONG

In a “Dear Colleague” letter dated February 14, 2025, to institutions receiving Title IV funds, the U.S. Department of Education called race-conscious affirmative action “morally reprehensible” (U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, 2025). After McGuire (2025), this text takes the converse position that “denying Black history is morally reprehensible”:

What is truly morally reprehensible is . . . the history of educational racism in the United States. [The letter] cites harm specifically to white and Asian students due to “institutions’ embrace of pervasive and repugnant race-based preferences” while not once mentioning the historic, persistent and often violent denial of educational opportunities—and, hence, economic and social opportunities—to Black Americans across centuries. Erasing Black History is shameful. (para. 1)

Dysconscious racism is on the rise in the 21st century. Dysconscious racism and its twin “colorblindness” uncritically uphold status quo norms and racial hierarchies, resulting in distorted thinking and cognitive dissonance. By failing to interrogate how power and race operate in U.S. institutions and claiming “race neutrality,” dysconscious racism tacitly reifies White privilege (King, 2015). The February 14 “Dear Colleague” letter is Exhibit A and provides a textbook example of the appropriation of social justice language by distorting or subverting terms such as *equity* and *justice*. Historians will no doubt study this in the future.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 promised an end to the segregation, discrimination, and exclusion experienced by those oppressed in a racially hierarchical society. Affirmative action in college admissions was a means to that end. Since its enactment, the various legal challenges to affirmative action have been parsed, from the 1978 *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case (where the Supreme Court ruled race-conscious affirmative action constitutional) to the 2023 case brought against Harvard (where the Court reversed its position; *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 2023). In the intervening 40-plus years, challenges were generally at least partially rejected by courts, not because the act corrected historical damage to an oppressed group but rather on the basis of “interest convergence” or the value of diversity to the holistic educational experience for all, which some have called out as itself a form of anti-Blackness (McLain & Nelson, 2019).

Race-conscious admissions, although important, were but a first step in closing equity gaps. Admitting diverse students is actually the easy part; creating conditions that allow them to persist, graduate, and ultimately thrive

is where the work happens. For higher education leaders committed to redressing historical exclusion and to Dr. Martin Luther King's and abolitionist Theodore Parker's (1879) vision of the arc of the moral universe, supporting students of color means providing intentional environments grounded in belonging, informed by trauma theory, and considerate of their lived experiences. Constructing these environments requires critical understanding of the nuances of equality, equity, and justice. As Minow (2021) wrote,

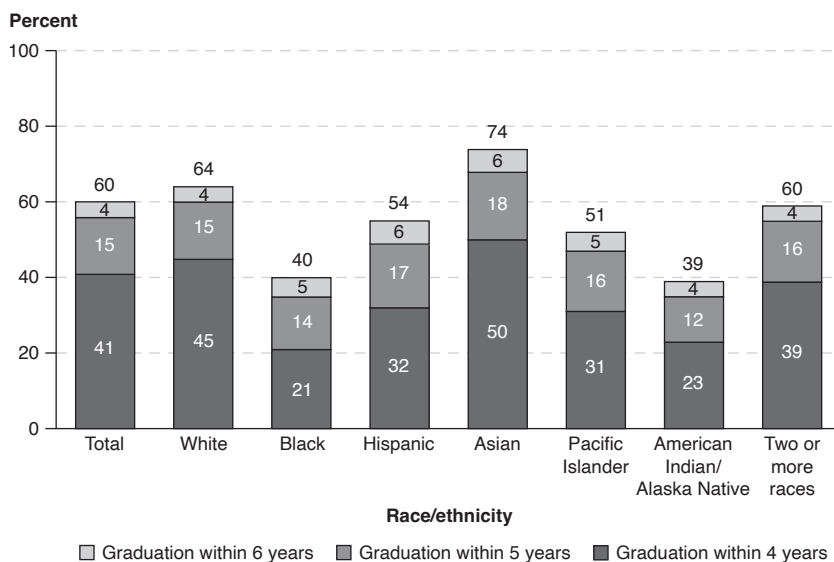
Education reformers are at the forefront of embracing the term “equity” rather than “equality.” One nonprofit education advocacy group explains, “Equality suggests providing every student with the same experience. Equity means working to overcome the historical legacy of discrimination, marginalization, and underinvestment that disadvantages specific groups of people, especially defined by race. Equity requires providing support tailored to the specific needs of students.” (p. 173)

Why is this still a conversation, more than 50 years after the Civil Rights Act? Because, according to the U.S. Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2019), racial disparities persist on multiple postsecondary indices (access, retention, persistence, graduation rates, financial/economic status) mirroring inequities in employment, housing, health, and many other measures of well-being in the larger society. Racial equity remains elusive in America.

Figure 1 depicts graduation rates for first-time, full-time undergraduates for cohort year 2010 (the most recent year for which NCES data are available; National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Six-year graduation rates were highest for Asian students at 74%, followed by White students (64%), two or more races (60%), Hispanic/Latine (54%), Pacific Islander (51%), Black (40%), and American Indian/Alaska Native students (39%). The average 6-year graduation rate across all races was 60%. All students of color groups except Asian students fall below this average, with Black and American Indian/Alaska Native students nearly 20 percentage points below the mean. Affirmative action and diversity initiatives are intended to acknowledge and redress these measurable inequities in educational outcomes.

Embedded practices that result in racial inequity (institutional or systemic racism) persist partly due to a displaced focus on inputs rather than outcomes. When policy outputs are marked by “unintended consequences” that result in disparities, the policies must change. Educational leaders, administrators, faculty, and staff create academic policies and have the power to change them. Equity audits help to determine if well-meaning legacy policies are de facto barriers to student and institutional progress.

Transforming campus environments and cultures, particularly administrative cultures, is neither easy nor quick and requires a broad and strategic

FIGURE 1. Cohort Year 2010 Percent Graduation Rates by Race/Ethnicity

Note. From *Indicator 23: Postsecondary Graduation Rates*, by National Center for Education Statistics, 2019 (https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_red.asp). In the public domain.

EDIA vision. Institutions sometimes fail in holistic campus transformation due to lack of an EDIA vision with clear goals and objectives, which can result in underfunding. At times when dysconsciousness racism is on the rise, institutions have deconstructed the meaning of and refined their EDIA language and programs (McGowan et al., 2025; Reisch & Jani, 2025) to focus on ideals such as belonging, dignity, and justice or on serving students from underresourced or first-generation backgrounds or historically segregated geographic locations. In tough times, campus mental health budgets may be among the first cut—particularly those for students of color. The theory, praxes, and examples provided in this text can help campus leaders construct arguments to support commitment to funding wellness for students of color. Mental health investment for students of color increases bottom-line key performance indicators. When mental health and wellness are prioritized, students of color persist and graduate. Persistence, retention, and graduation directly impact institutional finances and bring intangible benefits that contribute to long-term financial health. Underfunding and lack of a broad EDIA vision can be indicators of systemic structural problems in leadership. While all stakeholders in a community participate in change, trauma-informed leadership is essential for project success (see Chapter 11).

THIS IS THE MOMENT WE HAVE BEEN TRAINING FOR

As the aforementioned “Dear Colleague” letter suggests, diversity in higher education—intended to redress the wrong of historical exclusion—is under rollback at federal and state levels. While some institutions are refining their EDIA language to focus on belonging and social justice, others are dropping EDIA entirely as they attempt to conform to federal orders. This text lifts up the value that every person within and beyond the borders of this nation, regardless of background, ethnic origin, racial identification, socioeconomic status, physical or personal embodiment, documentation status, or any other individual characteristic, has the human and civil right to a higher education if they so choose.

Institutional leaders may feel distraught at the current attacks on EDIA and on higher education as a whole. Many leaders express continued commitment to EDIA values as vital to individual student development, healthy campuses, and a thriving, pluralistic democracy. This is the moment those committed to social justice have been training for. It is easy to espouse and endorse values and rights when they are not controversial. Meaningful change occurs when leaders step up to defend and advance values in the face of strong headwinds. In these United States, promoting EDIA values can be centered in the ongoing 400 years of resistance to White supremacy and social injustice. Campus leaders must remain strong for the students and populations they serve, who still have great need of a higher education. They must reflect on the work of civil rights leaders and proponents of social justice who came before—on those who made great strides promoting rights in even more difficult times and with fewer resources and allies. Honoring their efforts means continuing the struggle. The values embedded in the academy are bedrocks of a functioning, healthy, and progressive society and will endure long after the current political context has changed. This text therefore takes the long view despite the challenges that recur over time and, while acknowledging current barriers to implementation, offers hope—and ideally, guidance and practical solutions.

This challenging time is a moment to pause and assess: The EDIA movement, important as it is, was just a beginning. EDIA proponents have argued that diversity is a benefit to society. Even more fundamentally, every individual, regardless of social positionality, has a right to self-actualize and flourish as enshrined in founding documents (life, liberty, pursuit of happiness), a good unto itself. The attack on diversity has long roots, but the countermovement is long-standing and undaunted. This text you now hold contributes to that countermovement.

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