




## *Special Issue: Inclusive Learning*

# Forward to the Special Issue: Reflections on Inclusive Teaching

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## Abstract

The COVID-era has left a lasting impression on each of us. How are college educators applying the full complexity of these experiences to their work to make teaching and learning in all modalities more welcoming, meaningful, and fulfilling for everyone? This reflection opens a conversation about inclusive teaching and invites you to be part of it.

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The past two years have been a time of exhaustion and trauma with glimmers of rebirth in higher education. Burnout among faculty and those who support faculty is at an all-time high. Retirements and resignations abound. The conflation of remote emergency instruction with online learning has exacerbated negative perceptions about online courses, despite them providing higher education with a stable backbone through a global pandemic. The national spotlight on racial inequities has simultaneously further polarized our country and sparked greater awareness of unconscious biases and lifelong commitments to anti-racism. Diversity, equity, and inclusion are now moving out of segregated committees and leadership titles and becoming institutional values that guide the priorities of colleges and universities.

Each of us has our own story about the marks left by the last two years. As a White, cisgender, able-bodied woman, I have gained critical insight into the privileges afforded to me by my social identity and become more aware of my unconscious biases. While I read many books and articles, my most powerful learning moments were one-on-one conversations I had with colleagues of color who leaned into vulnerability and shared stories of toxic discrimination—that had been invisible to me. These raw, uncomfortable conversations have been my most valued professional development. The self-awareness that I've developed has enabled me to look back on

my career as an educator and see how I have been complicit in reinforcing and constructing power dynamics that privilege some students and leave others out.

Through these critical reflections, I remembered a piece of advice I received in my first year of teaching at a large community college. A White, female colleague told me to always “teach to the top of the class because it’s impossible to support all students.” As a young, overwhelmed faculty member with two small children who was looking at teaching through a colorblind lens, that advice made me feel better. It made my job feel more manageable. Today, I see it so differently. With the knowledge I now have about the racial and ethnic equity gaps that exist in every higher education dataset I’ve ever seen—course completion, persistence, transfer, and degree attainment—I see the racism in that advice. And I am now committed to bringing a race-conscious lens to all of the work I do because it enables me to see and empathize for the additional and dehumanizing burdens experienced by students of color and other marginalized groups. Supporting all students is hard. But that’s the hard work I chose.

I also now see how dominant culture in the United States—White dominant culture—deprives every human. Rugged individualism mixed with the glorification of busy-ness set each of us up to crash and burn in a global pandemic. This culture does not teach us to value and respect our emotions. We aren’t taught to recognize how our emotions shift like the wind and how they influence our ability to think clearly, perform to our full potential, and learn new things. We aren’t taught to check in on ourselves and each other and contribute to the collective good of the group. As the lines between our life and work are more blurred than ever before, we need to be intentional about nourishing ourselves with meaningful human connection in our families, in our workplaces, and in our classes, whether they are in person or online.

This special issue of *The Journal of Educational Research and Practice* is dedicated to exploring the multi-faceted dimensions of inclusive teaching. We offer this issue as an invitation for you to reflect back on the past couple of years and explore your stories of growth and struggle. How and why is your teaching becoming more inclusive and what do the outcomes of those changes look like? Whether you identify as a researcher or a practitioner, you have a contribution to make to this conversation. We want this issue to be a stage that elevates the work of educators across the nation seeking to make higher education a more equitable system. We hope you’ll pull out a chair and join us.



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