Wicked²: The increasing wickedness of educational developers as DEI cultural influencers

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Abstract

The global pandemic that began in 2020 amplified the chasm between higher education's stated goals to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and the systemic realities that many students, instructors, and staff grapple with on a daily basis. We contend that attenuating the barriers to DEI outcomes means first acknowledging that DEI is a wicked problem, in that it is impossible to solve because of competing, conflicting, and complex sociocultural forces from within and outside our institutions. We also contend that educational developers (EDs) are particularly well situated within the higher education ecology to be key cultural influencers in how to mitigate DEI-related wicked problems by tapping into our deep commitment to lifelong learning as a means for honing and modeling an equity mindset.

Keywords: diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), wicked problems, equity mindset, lifelong learning, cultural influencer, pandemic

In the wake of the pandemic and its aftermath, educational developers (EDs) face complex challenges. It could even be said that these challenges are "wicked." A "wicked problem," as originally coined by

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Rittel and Webber (1973), is a social policy problem irrevocably complicated by the incomplete, contradictory, and heterogeneous contexts pressing upon that problem. As such, wicked problems can never be solved—only mitigated—because the social complexities entwined in the problem prevent the possibility of stable and sustainable equitable outcomes (Conklin, 2005; Rittel & Webber, 1973). The intersection of the pandemic and social unrest in 2020 made painfully visible the elusiveness of the solutions to problems related to diversity, equity, and inclusion within educational institutions. Bass (2020) noted in "What's the Problem Now?" that higher education institutions in general and educational developers in particular need to reconceptualize their approach to addressing problems by adopting a mindset that adequately considers the thorny nuances that belie simple solutions. We expand on that assertion in arguing that our problem "now" is higher education's collective failure to adequately address diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as a wicked problem. The pandemic made it painfully evident just how negligent higher education has been at mitigating the inequities and systemic biases that marginalize underrepresented populations. Part of what makes DEI so wicked is that it can't be addressed head-on because DEI is not a singular entity—it is three separate but overlapping values—and is only visible in other contexts. In other words, problems with diversity, equity, and inclusion can only be addressed as they intersect with other areas, such as hiring, student engagement, or technology, which are likely wicked problems in their own right.

In this article, we argue that educational developers need to take on a serious role as cultural influencers, utilizing a distinctive set of informal and relational strategies, described in this article, to create converging approaches to the wickedness of DEI-related issues on our respective campuses. In this sense, we evoke "converging" in a similar spirit as convergent research, which seeks to bring multiple perspectives to bear on wrestling with complex intellectual problems (Bass, 2020). As educational developers, we are well-positioned to engage in this work because we are accustomed to working in the wicked, often

convergent, context of our profession with the never-ending goal of improving teaching and learning. Combining the two wicked problems of DEI and educational development, the Wicked[2] of our title, exponentially compounds the complexity of educational developers' work, hence the increasing wickedness of our roles. We assert, however, that when educational developers adopt strategies such as developing an equity mindset and extending lifelong learning principles to the organizational development of our institutions, we can create generative spaces where we continuously and collectively evaluate ourselves, our praxis, and institutional culture in the wicked context of DEI in higher education.

This article presents a theoretical approach to these challenges, not a list of practical solutions. Indeed, the very nature of a wicked problem belies the possibility of a solution since by definition wicked problems cannot be solved, only mitigated. While there is undeniable value to universal design for learning (UDL) checklists, implicit bias training, raising awareness of difficulties encountered by historically underserved populations in a university setting, and a host of other broadly defined DEI training and support programs, it is also important that EDs take the time to reflect on the challenges inherent in taking on a wicked problem that can never be fully and finally solved. Therefore, rather than seeking out straightforward interventions and strategies, we encourage EDs to approach wicked problems connected to DEI with open engagement, curiosity, and a willingness to try and try again.

How do we bend the arcs of diverse, intertwined, and sometimes clashing histories toward equity and inclusion? To bring clarity to how educational developers are uniquely positioned to navigate these challenges as cultural influencers, we first provide a brief discussion of wicked DEI-related issues in higher education before turning to the wickedness of educational development and an exploration of how to cultivate equity-mindedness. Some of what we discuss will already be known by many in the educational development field; that said, because the topic is boundary spanning and touches every part of

campus, we have written it in a way that we hope many outside of educational development will understand and find useful. We use personal narratives to showcase the diversity, complexity, and uniqueness of the wicked[2] problems we encounter as educational developers in our various institutional contexts to underscore the need to continuously learn new approaches and tools for advancing DEI outcomes. We conclude that when we leverage our spheres of influence and the multiplicity of tools at our disposal, we can have a positive impact in addressing DEI-related wicked problems within our institutions.

Advancing DEI as a Wicked Problem in Higher Education

In defining diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices within higher education, we acknowledge that each term has its own specific nuances and can manifest as a wicked problem in its own right. Taken together, however, they encompass a collective approach to a particularly linked set of values and thus the need for a mindset that is attuned to their interconnectedness. We use the term *diversity* to refer to varying social identities (e.g., age, body size, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, physical appearance, race, religion, sexual orientation) within a defined community. *Equity* is creating access and opportunities for all of these social identities so that they can achieve the same outcomes (Bensimon et al., 2016). Lastly, by *inclusion* we mean designing processes that intentionally and proactively incorporate people who have been historically underrepresented or marginalized within a particular community into the shaping of that community's social policies, systems, and values. Together, DEI practices are a commitment to foregrounding the aims of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the systemic and day-to-day actions of the institution.

When Rittel and Webber (1973) first introduced the concept of "wicked problems" as a way to describe challenges with addressing social policy, they specifically acknowledged that "there is no objective

definition of equity" (p. 155). Because different people require vary-ing methods and resources to reach the same outcomes, the defini-tion of what is equitable will change based on the context. Problems are wicked precisely because they have no easy solutions or perhaps no solution at all—at best, they can be temporarily tamed. Addition-ally, large-scale macro-environmental conditions can change so quickly as to produce new wicked problems that both magnify and minimize others. Wicked problems require the application of interdisciplin-ary insights and integrative thinking from multiple perspectives and multiple sources of knowledge. A wicked problem such as ameliorat-ing systemic racism may face significant resistance or barriers to the implementation of impermanent answers—for example, a presidential executive order banning the discussion of "diverse concepts," includ-ing "systemic racism" and "white privilege" (Decot, 2020). To engage such obstructions, educational developers will need a wider-ranging and more diverse skill set than ever before. We stand with other edu-cational developers who have argued that the entire institution should be redesigned for the purpose of developing people—faculty, staff, students—who can adequately negotiate the murky waters of wicked problems (Barnett, 2000, 2012; Bass, 2020; Ramaley, 2014).

As the populations of whom colleges and universities employ and serve expand, the role of educational developers is also changing. Such changing roles are complicated by the fact that many of the same sociocultural forces that compound the wickedness of problems out-side the academy lead to wicked problems within the academy. Glo-balization, for instance, has resulted in greater movement of people, who bring their experiences and belief systems across cultures, result-ing in institutional demographics more diverse than at any other point in history. Such diversity adds rich value while increasing the need for DEI considerations in every area of the institution.

In addition to cultural and ethnic diversity, we must also recognize ideological diversity in the academy. Much as cultural diversity brings additional ways of knowing to complex global issues, ideological diver-sity also represents various, sometimes divergent, ways of knowing. As

Haidt (2013) has argued, liberals and conservatives may as well inhabit different moral universes. In many cases across the nation, charges of institutional racism as well as ideological disagreements over issues related to diversity and inclusion have led to conflict on campuses, often with damaging consequences for the colleges involved (Jones, 2021; Robertson, 2021). As students, staff, and faculty bring increasingly diverse experiences and perspectives, the educational developer faces new challenges serving those populations who work and learn within institutions not designed for their success. There is increasing skepticism that the Western rationalist worldview will alone be sufficient to mitigate challenges of great global complexity. The cultural diversification of our faculty, staff, and student body forces us to grapple with the fact that different cultures bring altogether different ways of knowing these problems. In theory, such epistemological diversity should foster the kind of open discussion and engagement with competing ideas that are championed in the name of free speech and academic freedom (Karpenko & Dietz, 2016; Pallas, 2001; Siegel, 2006). In reality, when such discussions involve emotionally charged topics of identity, such as race and gender, there exists the potential for tension between the ideals of diverse perspectives and the inclusion of all voices. As DEI advocates, educational developers should resist shutting down divergent perspectives in favor of embracing conversations that may challenge some of our most closely held values and assumptions.

Educational Development Is (Also) a Wicked Problem

At one level, centers for teaching and learning (CTLs) play a role in addressing wickedness through support for instructors who wish to address problems related to advancing DEI through their teaching (Hanstedt, 2018; Marback, 2009; Yukawa, 2015). That said, recognizing teaching and learning as a wicked problem may be one of the foundational threshold concepts for educational development, which

means that most EDs are already experienced wicked problem wrestlers. On a regular basis, EDs grapple with complex pedagogical problems, adapting to the needs of a variety of constituencies and interpreting challenges through the lenses of diverse contexts. The nature of our boundary-spanning positionality—moving among faculty, staff, and administration while also connected to individuals from across and beyond our institutions with a dazzling array of skill sets and backgrounds—allows us to view wicked problems in a uniquely integrated manner (Cruz et al., 2021; Green & Little, 2016; Kearns et al., 2018; Little & Green, 2012).

Indeed, theories of wicked problems emphasize the need for inter- and trans-disciplinary perspectives to address their multifaceted nature. In this sense, the collective expertise of EDs is expansive because we come to educational development from a variety of backgrounds and there is no standard training for the role (Green & Little, 2016). We rely on certain essential skills to help us succeed in our work, such as collaboration, effective communication, resourcefulness, relationship building, reliance on evidence-based research, and reflective practice (Wright et al., 2018). These skills allow us to be adaptive, dexterous even, as we shift our attention between people, projects, and perspectives as circumstances require (Grupp & Little, 2019).

As EDs—whether housed within CTLs or embedded within departments and programs—"come in from the margins" to take on more active roles outside of the provision of services directly for instructors, we are being challenged to wrestle with the shift to our core identities (Schroeder, 2011). As Plank (2019) suggested, our professional discourse often places us on the sidelines, or margins, and relegates our work to the backstage; but when it comes to wicked organizational challenges, we can also wield influence, and to an increasing extent power. That power stems partially from our cumulative expertise but also from our ability to harness the collective agency of the instructors, with whom we often have developed considerable social capital (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009; Roxå et al., 2011), which can act as a powerful form of cultural influence.

Educational developers can act as effective influencers because we do not have a strict teleological orientation to the wicked problem of teaching and learning in the first place. At our best, we are comfortable with the inability to have a stable end point because we frame learning as a never-ending process. For a person committed to a life of learning, even expertise is not an end point but a signal of where one devotes significant, ongoing learning energy. For EDs, teaching is about encouraging others (i.e., students) to be committed learners while also retaining the mindset of learners ourselves. A learner is curious, open, humble, experimental, generative, and reflective. And we, as educational developers, have a body of evidence-based practice in theories of agency and motivation that enables us to engender this mindset in others (Albon et al., 2016; Dweck, 1999; Jenkins & Alfred, 2018) and to work toward fostering a shared culture that recognizes and rewards lifelong learning at all levels.

Compounding the complexity of EDs' changing organizational positionality is the complexity of DEI-related work within an institution. EDs already know that learning is fundamentally about facilitating change, whether individual or systemic (Timmermans, 2014). When we invite people—students, instructors, or even entire institutions—to engage with the wicked problems connected to DEI, we are asking them to be open to change. The feelings of risk and vulnerability that come with change can create resistance and require intentional efforts to build and maintain trust among stakeholders. As with learning more broadly, work associated with DEI is an ongoing process, which means that the people working toward that aim never stop learning about the ongoing and changing facets of this particular wicked problem. As a professional community, we can adapt, change, and grow as DEI-related challenges adapt and change. These threshold concepts of teaching, learning, and DEI are nested within one another in an unending matryoshka doll, where each concept both envelops and is enveloped by the others. When it comes to the wicked problems entangled with DEI in higher education, we have the potential to become major players in this wicked game.

Cultivating Equity-Mindedness

As educational developers, we can be most effective as cultural influencers when we inhabit an "equity mindset" to interrogate, analyze, assess, and mitigate the "opportunity gaps" contributing to DEI-related wicked problems so that we can act and intervene with intentionality (Milner, 2010). That means we begin by inserting personal intentionality into what we are doing through critical self-reflection: What are the areas in our individual practice that must be transformed for equity?

How do we as EDs individually and collectively embody an "equity mindset"? Making equity-minded changes is not simply a matter of accomplishing tasks on the "diversity index" or a UDL checklist. There is no singular design, strategy, or approach that universally encompasses the broad and intricate scope of sociocultural differences. Being equity-minded is not a toggle where one either is or is not. Being equity-minded is a practice, cultivated over time, through continuous introspection, self-inquiry, and transformative learning (Bensimon et al., 2016). To be cultural influencers on DEI-related issues and encourage deep, ongoing systemic engagement with DEI, we have the responsibility to tap into lifelong learning rooted in an equity mindset. We are most at risk to undercut DEI-related goals or ossify inequities when we claim achievement of an equity mindset and use it to sit in judgment of others. The equity-minded educational developer resists the self-congratulatory impulse that lulls us into a fixed mindset instead of one of growth that pushes us to transform along with the systems we inhabit (Dweck, 2006). According to Mezirow (2000), transformation is "the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference" (p. 6), which can happen when one has the opportunity to reflect on particular concepts or circumstances. Critical self-reflection is the precursor for equity-minded transformation because it challenges one's preconceived assumptions and ideologies (Jenkins & Alfred, 2018). The process of transformation is often spurred when people experience impactful events. The seismic reverberations of the

pandemic coupled with racial turmoil have created a rare opportunity for profound transformation in higher education and an opportunity for educational developers to engage personally in and lead our institutions in rigorous critical reflection.

Specifically, educational developers should critically reflect on how our personal histories and the societal structures we inhabit inform our assumptions and beliefs about our institutions, constituents, and the teaching and learning process (Canniff, 2008; Jenkins & Alfred, 2018; McCalman, 2007; Vescio et al., 2003). Where have we benefited from or contributed to practices of gate-keeping, exclusion, opacity, nepotism, and exceptionalism? When we comprehend the historical underpinnings of our beliefs as educational developers, we are able to better relate in our interactions with others. When we avoid scrutinization of our personal histories, we risk blindness to the harmful impacts of power, privilege, and disadvantage in our society and institutions.

As educational developers, we should examine the foundational principles on which we cultivate our practice because those will inform us about the degree to which we are committed to fostering equity in our spheres of influence. We must ask ourselves hard questions such as "Am I being equity-minded? How do I know?" or "How well do I comprehend the influence and consequences of social inequities at my institutions?" and "What are my beliefs about my identities, the identities of my stakeholders, and how do these beliefs affect my responsibilities?" Educational developers' practice is marked by their personal beliefs and values. Thus, the centrality of equity in any designed curriculum, program, or action can determine whether it is a tool for maintaining the status quo or an instrument of social redress.

In addition to self-reflection, we need to interrogate our external influencing factors. We must then ask ourselves, "How are we complicit—intentionally or otherwise—in maintaining the cycles of oppression that operate in our courses, our universities, our schools, and our society?" (Cochran-Smith, 2004, p. 83). This requires examining how DEI issues intersect with our work as educational developers. Educational developers who address DEI-related challenges should be

willing to move beyond categorical thinking to engage the complex intersections of racial and cultural dynamics within themselves as well as their institutions. This is neither simple nor painless because it can mean confronting some deep-seated beliefs that fall in line with systemic structures of oppression. Nevertheless, if we believe the purpose of education is to maximize the access and opportunities for all peoples, our practice and its impact must be scrutinized for equity.

Something Wicked This Way Comes: Case Studies

To assist our institutions as cultural influencers on how to nimbly respond to and mitigate DEI-related wicked problems, EDs should model and commit to the lifelong learning habits necessary for honing an equity mindset. This wicked paso doble is much easier said than done. While no two institutions will face the exact same iteration of a DEI-related wicked problem and each will have context-specific goals, limitations, and resources, EDs can learn much from one another when we share opportunities both leveraged and missed when facing DEI-related challenges in our different contexts.

To help illustrate just how wicked one specific tendril tangled in the overall ball of DEI-related wicked problems can get, some of this article's authors responded to the prompt "In what ways did the pandemic amplify wicked problems related to DEI and technology on your campus?" We picked the shared context of the pandemic and the specific issue of technology, a common discussion topic on the POD listserv, as a way to highlight both the challenges and approaches we held in common as EDs as well as how our specific contexts created different responses, gaps, and points for reflection. Each story emphasizes different aspects of being a cultural influencer, adopting an equity mindset, or engaging in critical self-reflection. Taken all together, these stories illustrate that "there is no definitive formulation of a wicked problem" (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 163), which is why our cultural influencer strategies to mitigate these problems vary in approach and

effect. Yet in sharing the following experiences, we expand each of our critical reflection and problem-mitigation toolkits so that we each have more "permissible operations" to choose from in the future (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 164).

Lauri Dietz
Associate Director, Introductory Seminars & Faculty Development
Stanford University

I oversee a program that offers about 120 small seminars (IntroSems) for first-year undergraduates. IntroSems complement university DEI goals as a counterbalance to the large lecture courses common at research institutions and can give first-year students early opportunities to connect with faculty mentors. Many instructors at our residential university preferred a low-tech approach to their seminars, and thus the pandemic created a significant learning curve for using Canvas and Zoom. Furthermore, incoming students were not trained on these tools, so IntroSems instructors needed to be prepared to teach students the technology along with the content.

Our unit's academic technology specialist and I created a Digital Ambassador (DA) program, inspired by a graduate program in the School of Education, that pairs IntroSems instructors with undergraduate students trained as academic technology specialists to help the instructors design, build, and deliver their courses. However, even though the demand for on-campus remote jobs was high, our applicants were less diverse than usual, likely because the position favored students with good tech and Wi-Fi at home. As a complicating factor, because of HR policies that prohibited us from hiring students residing outside the United States, many international students were excluded as applicants.

The DAs, however, became so much more than tech support; they were a cadre of cultural influencers. For the courses they served, about a third of the curriculum, they were stealth educational developers who had both the theory from their training as well as the direct experience

as students to influence the design and facilitation of the seminars. Our faculty care about students' perceptions and were remarkably open to hearing from students about what students need. The weekly team meetings with DAs became important generative opportunities for us to learn and advise, to influence by proxy. Faculty were forced to change as a consequence of the pandemic, but the degree and quality of that change toward more student-centered, inclusive teaching practices was amplified because students were the messengers. Many faculty told us that the online version of their seminar was their best yet, citing the strong sense of community created in their courses and crediting their DAs for much of that success.

As the university transitions out of the pandemic and prepares for a return to in-person teaching, the question looms about the extent to which these changes toward more inclusive teaching practices will remain and grow. While we plan to carry the Digital Ambassador program forward and adapt it to an in-person world, will faculty still seek the DAs' support and counsel? Or will resuming in-person classes mean resuming old pedagogical habits?

China Jenkins
Executive Director, TEAM Center
Texas Southern University

Texas Southern University is a historically Black university (HBCU) whose student population is mostly composed of underserved students of color as well as first-generation and international students. I direct the Teaching, Enrichment, Advising, and Mentoring (TEAM) Center, which is a CTL situated within the College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences. My responsibilities include both faculty development and student academic support.

Most of our programs are clinical; therefore, the majority of our faculty and many students were not accustomed to online learning. At the beginning of the pandemic, our newly formed Online Instructional Task Force had to determine online assessment parameters to

recommend to our faculty. The most articulated concern from faculty was how to maintain academic integrity in a virtual setting. Our concern in the task force was to consider good assessment practices that were equitable for both faculty and students. We disseminated a curated list of best online testing practices and encouraged the faculty to implement them. While these practices were intended to help faculty and students, there were some unintended negative consequences. For instance, one of the adopted strategies suggested shortening the time on multiple choice tests. As a result, we received backlash from some students who complained they were given too little time to read case studies and complete a test, especially when facing English language challenges, struggles with slow internet, or difficulty navigating the new exam-monitoring software. We sent regular emails to faculty reminding them to be sensitive to the needs of students and practice flexibility. We met with students to gain feedback and gauge their success in transitioning to new platforms and procedures. Our task force met often to tweak recommendations that balanced what faculty were willing to do and what was equitable for students.

At the end of the fall semester, 17 students were caught violating the academic integrity policy—the most students in a single term recorded thus far. We are in the process of updating our academic integrity policy and finding other strategies for monitoring online testing. The academic appeal process for these students was particularly challenging. Many students called me or sent emails crying foul, stating that some faculty members' willful negligence of their needs created a hostile, unforgiving learning environment that led them to cheat. Some of them were not wrong. I was deeply disappointed in some of my colleagues' staunch behaviors and their impact on our students. Then I consulted with faculty and found they faced many challenges as well—such as managing personal difficulties while trying to teach in a foreign environment. They struggled with the nebulous concept of balancing flexibility with rigor. They told of students that they caught lying to them and taking advantage of their kindness. Some of them were not wrong. I was deeply disappointed in some

of the students' manipulative behaviors and how they wearied and hardened the faculty against them. Then I considered our administration and reflected on our own complicity in this wicked problem. I found myself frequently asking the questions "What are the problems and how can they be mitigated?" and "How can I address these problems without viewing faculty and students through a deficit lens?" I frequently returned to these questions because I recognized that my initial reactions were judgmental in nature. I was able to move out of deficit thinking by considering the contexts and constraints of people I served and found the capacity for empathy.

There is some good that came out of this trying time. We have formed a new work group that has been creating a comprehensive student success plan with policies that address testing, remediation, intrusive advising, and much more. The work group includes the voices of faculty, students, and administration. I will be implementing a new supplemental instruction program in the fall to address the learning gaps in our high-impact courses. Amid the challenges and changes, there is still hope for progress toward a more equitable college.

Laura Cruz
Associate Research Professor for Teaching and Learning Scholarship
Penn State University

As of this writing, I have been at Penn State for about three years, but I still feel like the new kid on the block. Penn State is really big. With close to 100,000 students, 24 campuses, and 8,000 faculty members, it is a highly complex entity. By my count, we have at least 11 units that function like CTLs, so ours is one of many. Given this scale, it is tempting to turn away from thinking as an agent or lever of change because no single individual can seemingly hope to make a noticeable dent in an organization so large.

With the shift to remote teaching in spring 2020, my colleagues and I were appointed (along with many others) to a number of high-level committees focused on the development of institution-wide

responses. Among other activities, these committees developed shared communications (e.g., a shared website, a biweekly email from the provost) and coordinated a series of institution-wide workshops focused on the basics of online teaching, which were attended by hundreds of faculty at a time. Our CTL did not lead these workshops, as they largely fell under the jurisdiction of a larger Teaching and Learning with Technology (TLT) group. Through our individual consultations with faculty, however, we began to get the sense that the institution-wide strategies were providing equitable access to information and resources, but they may not have been an appropriate venue for building inclusivity.

To address the latter, we created a program called "put it into practice." The premise sounds simple—we offered 15-minute time slots for instructors to practice using a new technology, often Zoom related, such as setting up breakout rooms. In these sessions, the faculty member could choose what they wanted to practice, and we functioned primarily as their test students. To make a small "class," we reached out to friends in the TLT unit to join us, and, whenever possible, we also invited the tech TAs (undergraduate students) to participate. In other words, we coordinated a shifting roster of educational developers, tech TAs, instructional designers, and related staff and faculty to spend time working directly with faculty together—a convergence of roles that rarely, if ever, had taken place before.

These sessions filled up quickly, and we had to add many additional sessions. We found that the targeted, private, and self-directed nature of the sessions created safe spaces, especially for instructors who may not have internal networks, such as first-year faculty, adjunct instructors, or graduate students, to come and build their confidence with these new teaching tools. Perhaps more importantly, however, the sessions built relationships that connected these faculty to the institution and to their new "students" (us) and between us and the other units that provide faculty development. By watching one another put into practice what we do, we learned a great deal from and about one another—in just 15 minutes. It will be interesting to see if (and how)

these relationships will be sustained in the post-COVID world, especially in terms of balancing equity and inclusion for faculty who work in an institution of this scale and scope. Indeed, the institution has placed a high priority on diversity, equity, and inclusion work going forward, and I wonder how we will navigate the heightened degree of collaboration and cooperation that will be needed to meet these challenges.

Amber Handy
Former Associate Vice President for Faculty Enrichment & Research and Director, Kossen Center for Teaching & Learning
Mississippi University for Women

A few weeks before COVID-19 struck, I resigned my position at Mississippi University for Women (The W) and moved across the country for family reasons. I had been the primary coordinator of faculty professional development and instructional support, so when the pandemic struck, I willingly returned as a consultant through the end of the semester. A coeducational public university of nearly 3,000 students, The W serves primarily first-generation and lower-income students, and approximately 36% of students are Black or African American. Most are commuters working one or more jobs. Roughly a third take classes primarily online, another third primarily on campus, and the rest fall somewhere in between.

While the challenges The W faced during the shift to online learning were similar to any other small regional university, my ability to impact the decision-making process changed dramatically. As a consultant, I no longer had a direct connection to the faculty or policy-writing committees. Instead, I researched answers to the provost's questions, recommended issues or policies for the university to consider, and served as a resource for the committee convened to oversee the transition to online instruction. One major challenge was ensuring reliable internet and computer access for students. In the early weeks after the transition to online instruction, we heard reports of students taking

essay exams and writing major papers on their phones or sharing a single aged laptop among multiple family members trying to work or attend school remotely. Others could not receive internet service in their rural locations, even after providers offered discounted or free student rates for the duration of the crisis. Every step we took to try to address this problem revealed more challenges. For example, our librarians collaboratively built a statewide list of free library parking lot Wi-Fi hotspots, but that still left coverage gaps and required funds for computer equipment and gasoline at a time when job losses were tightening budgets. The newly created Student Emergency Fund provided small grants to help students in financial emergencies, but it was not yet deeply funded. In the early days of the pandemic, we also struggled with effective communication to share these resources, as students quickly became so overwhelmed with email and learning management system (LMS) messages that resources shared by well-meaning administrators were often underutilized.

I used what influence I had to draw attention to issues of equity, such as the challenge of student internet and technology access in a rural area, food and housing insecurity, and the unexpected burdens of caregiving and generally advocated for faculty and administrators to be as flexible as possible with their expectations while also accounting for accreditation needs. The attention to DEI-related needs was a continuation of my previous work at The W, so this was a natural role for me to undertake. But I found it challenging to do so by speaking only with a few trusted colleagues rather than by being in the room for larger discussions and follow-up.

Rita Kumar
Executive Director, Faculty Enrichment Center
University of Cincinnati

At the university, I oversee the professional development and training for faculty and staff distinct from the pedagogy support provided by the Center for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning (CET&L).

When the pandemic hit and instruction went online, the Faculty Enrichment Center (FEC) responded by providing consistent online support with technology, even though technology was not an official part of the center's portfolio. The FEC initiated an online training program in collaboration with the information technology office to help faculty use the expanded features of WebEx, the preferred platform at the university. The weekly training program focused on how to use the breakout room features so faculty could use them for teaching, mentoring, and meeting purposes. The FEC responded to the need of the hour, but the weekly training sessions were not enough to meet the needs of all faculty who were seeking training.

Yet access to high-speed Wi-Fi was inconsistent and expensive off campus for both faculty and students. Some students who relied on the computer labs on campus did not have computers to work from home. The university partnered with Cincinnati Bell to bring affordable basic internet service to Pell-eligible undergraduate students. Initiatives such as Innovate Ohio curated a list of providers offering free cellular hotspots and Wi-Fi. Despite these efforts, the high rate of COVID-19 in minority communities severely impacted their access and ability to use technology.

Even though the FEC and CET&L have different areas of focus, we collaborated to survey faculty to understand diverse experiences, generate recommendations, and identify best practices for teaching, research, and self-care based on their experiences. We then created a best practices guide for easy and equitable faculty access and use. Prompted by the knowledge of inequity of student access to resources, the FEC focused on creating generative spaces where faculty could discuss such inequities and how they had been further exacerbated in the circumstances created by the pandemic. The FEC provided the format of a virtual water cooler for informal conversations and training opportunities on implicit bias, creating equitable virtual environments, addressing online microaggressions, and creating safe learning spaces while the CET&L focused on helping faculty create inclusive pedagogical practices.

Since pedagogy-related topics were to be addressed by the CET&L, it was often difficult to create distinct boundaries of what the FEC should offer in response to faculty expectations as they related to DEI. The opportunities for virtual training across the range of DEI-related topics were welcomed by faculty. Will faculty continue to show the same level of interest in DEI training as they transition back to campus and an in-person environment? How do educational developers maintain sensitive relationships with university partners as each claims DEI-related issues as their domain? Addressing DEI-related problems has to be a shared commitment because boundaries are blurry and detract from the important work of addressing equity.

Ian Norris
Professor of Marketing and Chair of Psychology
Berea College

As a faculty member who is not in an official educational developer role, I offer a complementary yet different set of perspectives on the pandemic. Berea College has a long-standing commitment to equity and inclusion. Given that we serve exclusively lower-income students, there was a great deal of concern as to whether students would have access to the technology necessary to complete their courses online. Furthermore, most of our students work when not in session, often full-time in support of their families. We knew that the economic conditions brought on by the pandemic would mean that many students would be necessarily balancing work over academic responsibilities. For this reason, the college made the early and bold decision to essentially wrap up classes to whatever extent possible to avoid unnecessary online instruction.

On the one hand, this was a decision motivated by student access and equity. The experience for faculty, however, was not equal and, in some cases, perhaps not equitable across departments. At the time, I was tenured in one department yet serving as chair of another. Both of these departments had very different conversations about how to

finish their courses, with one department essentially planning to move all remaining coursework online to be completed asynchronously and another considering a decision to end classes early and eliminate as much of the remaining work as possible. The primary difference in these conversations had to do with the kind of work typically expected of students in each department's courses and the feasibility of completing that work remotely.

In addition to my dual academic role, I was collaborating with the Center for Teaching and Learning in a variety of capacities, including as co-facilitator of the New Faculty Seminar. It was immediately clear that newer faculty had a facility with online instruction that older faculty did not have, particularly those that had not taught elsewhere. In short, there were vast disparities in terms of how expertise in and knowledge of instructional technology were distributed across faculty.

For this reason, the college launched a monumental professional development effort to train faculty in teaching online courses. I participated first as a pilot student in the course and then as the instructor for one of several campus-wide sections. The course was delivered online through an LMS and included many components of high-quality online instruction, including moderated asynchronous discussions and synchronous small-group breakout discussions. The content was designed to provide instruction in online teaching, including a unit on equity, educational access, and technology. By the end of the summer, nearly every single faculty member at the college had completed the course and was compensated for doing so.

Just as the student experience across campus was uneven in the transition to online, faculty experiences in online teaching were also uneven, which I experienced as a discussion moderator. Some faculty remained utterly unconvinced of the efficacy of online instruction throughout the entire course section. Nevertheless, because of the college's commitment to equity, all decisions throughout the pandemic were made in light of these concerns—not just with respect to the students but also the faculty. That said, while an equity mindset

and a culture of inclusion provided a strong ethical basis for decision-making among senior leadership, it could not ensure an equality of outcome among campus stakeholders.

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Each of these scenarios is wicked in its own right with no satisfying "happily ever after" ending. The scenarios point to new, unforeseen problems, consequences, and gaps. Moments of "success" are tenuous and ephemeral. These lived experiences highlight how iterative a commitment to addressing wicked problems has to be. Perhaps what is most promising across these examples is the prevalence of equity mindsets. The shared goal is clear—to prepare and support all instructors and students during a global pandemic so that instructors can translate their learning outcomes to a remote environment and so that students can achieve course learning outcomes remotely. Yet there is also an acknowledgment of the deep level of institutional and even communal responsibility required to achieve that seemingly impossible goal—a collective goal we can only strive for but never achieve comprehensively even in non-pandemic times. And yet we persist.

As EDs, we have long known that the most effective teaching and learning takes into account the whole person and the whole system. The pandemic made that even more evident. What difference does it make if an instructor knows how to effectively conduct think-pair-share exercises through Zoom if students and the instructor don't have reliable internet or a personal computer? At a moment in history in which educational technology held the promise to greatly expand educational access, institutions that serve diverse populations faced a technological environment that was, in some cases, severely limiting to educational access. These technological limitations show how much is beyond the educational developer's area of influence—we are not in positions to solve the national internet infrastructure problem. Our local attempts to mitigate the inequities magnified by these barriers to reliable technology can feel futile at times.

Yet these examples and the equity mindset dispositions within them also demonstrate how and where EDs can be, or have the potential to be, expansive cultural influencers. We recognize that there are many factors, such as positionality, resources, and institutional politics, that could affect the potential to build cultural capital and be a cultural influencer. From faculty and administrative leadership positions, we can guide departmental decision-making. As individual contributors, we can use an equity mindset when working with instructors, colleagues, and students. Whether from within or outside a CTL, we can create hubs for resource and information sharing. We can be thought leaders on committees in rethinking academic integrity policies and prevention strategies. The cultural influencer will run into territory challenges too. When we reach to fill gaps, others may see that as overreaching or as mission creep. But we have to pick our battles, too, and the true test of the cultural influencer's effectiveness is when others pick up the torch. The more people who shine lights on the big and small inequities that pockmark our institutions, the fewer crevices there are for those inequities to hide.

Finally, what is also evident across our stories about the intersection of DEI concerns and technology during a pandemic is how an ED's embodiment of lifelong learning is proportional to our potential as cultural influencers. While none of our stories directly called attention to it because it's a practice we often take for granted, we all found ourselves doing things beyond our expertise. That is the way of the educational developer. We became quick studies of online meeting and LMS platforms, online teaching and learning best practices, and financial aid and academic technology bureaucracies. Yet our learning of new pedagogies, skills, and technologies is not simply for our own edification. We learn so we can quickly pivot to teach others, to dispense that knowledge through the train-the-trainer model at the heart of so much of our work. Yet this work is always imperfect and incomplete and became even more so during the pandemic. Nevertheless, that does not dissuade us as educational developers in our quest to form a more perfect university.

Conclusion

If we are to embrace the idea of learning as a wicked problem, as Bass (2020) enjoins us to do, then this necessitates a shift in thinking about our roles as educational developers in several significant ways. If learning is indeed wicked, then this repositions our expertise and what we have to offer to faculty, students, and programs. In this sense, we serve less to answer questions and more to ask them. Rather than serving as a fount of knowledge, we become the hub through which open, persistent inquiry and critical reflection into teaching and learning occurs. We work to problematize assumptions, critically interrogate biases, provoke insight, and inspire deeper thinking around pedagogical questions. In other words, we may not be able to solve diversity, equity, and inclusion challenges, but we can, hopefully, get people to think more deeply about them.

With the repositioning of expertise comes a related shift in our locus of control. We are moving from being the sage on the stage to the guide on the side, to paraphrase a popular teaching expression. We are no longer just the experts on teaching and learning; we are experts in facilitating how people think about, apply, and assess their practice. Rather than leading workshops, for example, we may instead serve as consultants to establish programs among small groups of faculty with shared interests in DEI work. As consultants, we can ensure not only that the program will succeed in the short term but also that it can be sustained over the long term—without us. We work to plant seeds so that others may reap the benefits.

These shifts in expertise and control need not limit our impact. As cultural influencers, we work to strengthen our respective campuses as vibrant—and distinctive—equity-minded teaching and learning communities. In this sense, we shift our focus from outcomes to convergence, to enhancing the flow of ideas, people, and practices. That strength will be needed. If the shared experience of the pandemic and racial unrest has taught us anything, it is that the future is unknown and, arguably, unknowable. Our current evidence base may

or may not hold in the conditions higher education will be facing, but we can foster (even model) qualities such as adaptability and resilience through our commitment to lifelong learning and critical self-reflection for students, staff, and faculty, qualities that will enable us to weather whatever wickedness may come our way.

Biographies

Lauri Dietz is the Associate Director of Introductory Seminars & Faculty Development at Stanford University. While her PhD is in English Renaissance Literature, she comes to educational development from the dynamically collaborative world of writing centers, where she spent over a decade directing peer tutoring and writing across the curriculum programs. She has published and presented on humanities pedagogies, digital portfolios, and peer tutoring and mentoring.

China M. Jenkins is the founding Executive Director of the Teaching, Enrichment, Advising, and Mentoring (TEAM) Center in the College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences at Texas Southern University. Her PhD is in Educational Human Resource Development from Texas A&M University. She has led educational development centers and taught for two- and four-year institutions. Her scholarly work, teaching, and service focus on adult learning, educational development, equity pedagogy, and culturally responsive approaches to teaching within higher education.

Laura Cruz is an Associate Research Professor for Teaching and Learning Scholarship with the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence at Penn State. She received her PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. In addition to her faculty positions, she previously served as the director of two CTLs and as the editor of four journals, including *To Improve the Academy*. Her publications and presentations focus on

systems thinking, pedagogical innovation, organizational development, and emerging forms of scholarship.

Amber Handy is the Associate Vice Provost for the Center for Excellence in Inclusive Teaching and Learning at the University of Wisconsin–Parkside. She previously served as the Associate Vice President of Faculty Enrichment & Research and Founding Director of the Kossen Center for Teaching & Learning at Mississippi University for Women. She earned her PhD in Medieval History and Gender Studies from the University of Notre Dame and turned to educational development out of a career-long interest in effective pedagogy and desire to make higher education more equitable and enriching.

Rita Kumar serves as the Executive Director of the Faculty Enrichment Center at the University of Cincinnati. As a Professor of English, Rita brings 25 years of teaching experience to her role as an educational developer. Her research and scholarship focus on problem-based learning, innovative pedagogy, and inclusive classroom practices. She is the co-editor of the recently published book *Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education: Strategies for Teaching*. She serves on the Executive Board of the Women's Network of Ohio, an affiliate of the American Council on Education (ACE) Women's Network.

Julia Metzker serves as Director of the Washington Center for Improving Undergraduate Education at The Evergreen State College. Julia learned the value of a transformative education as an undergraduate at Evergreen. After earning a PhD in Chemistry, she spent 10 years teaching, where she discovered the power of community-based learning to engage students. She has held both formal and informal roles in educational development throughout her career. Her most recent project, *Learning That Matters: A Field Guide to Course Design for Transformative Education,* offers pragmatic approaches to designing courses that support transformative learning and equitable outcomes for students.

Ian Norris is Associate Professor of Marketing at Berea College. He is a fellow in the American Council on Education Fellows Program for 2020–2022. At Berea, he collaborates extensively with the Center for Teaching and Learning as a Mellon Fellow and as a co-facilitator of the New Faculty Seminar. He also served as Chair of the Psychology Department. He received a PhD in Social Psychology from Texas Tech University, and his primary research is in consumer behavior.

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