

Transcript

Evolving Perspectives on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Rice feat. Connie Porter & Alex Byrd

Publishing Date: May 29, 2024

[00:00] **Scott:** Welcome to Owl Have You Know, a podcast from Rice Business. This episode is part of our Up Next series, where faculty, researchers, and alumni weigh in on the trends currently shaping the world of business.

On the show today with me is Connie Porter and Alex Byrd. I get the privilege to be here with you to facilitate a conversation about a super important, fascinating, evolving topic of diversity, equity, and inclusion. I want to, sort of, start at the top of the discussion to have you each share a definition for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Connie, do you mind starting?

[00:36] **Connie:** There are lots of definitions out there, but there are some definitions that I think are particularly useful, given the role that I have in the business school. And I like to define each of those very differently. Some people lump it all together and try to give a definition for DEI altogether. I happen to think that each of those words has a meaning. They're three legs of a stool that uphold what we're trying to accomplish.

So, diversity is about representative differences within a population. So, for example, within the business school, we might think about that in terms of, not only demographics, like age, education, income, and race, but gender identity, nationality, language, culture, functional ability, whether that is cognitive and unseen or physical and seen. There are all types of diversity that may matter to an organization. And we take a very broad view here at Rice Business.

In terms of inclusion, it's one thing to have representation, but it's another thing to feel that you have an organization where everyone, regardless of their identity, feels like they belong, feels like they are accepted and respected and valued for their contributions and the lens through which they make those contributions based on their identity. And I think it was Deloitte that had a study out some time ago about inclusion in organizations that said, at its highest point, in organizations, inclusiveness is about individuals feeling that they can speak up without fear of retaliation or embarrassment and they can feel safe in doing that. And ultimately, they feel

empowered to grow and to be their best selves at work. And I love that view of it. That's what we want for people at Rice Business, whether you're faculty, staff, or students, just to be able to feel free to be your best self and grow.

And then, finally, equity. I have a lot of conversations about equity and what it does not mean, which is equality. Those are two different concepts, although they have justice at their core. I view equity as being about fairness. If we think about fair process, fair access to resources, particularly, in organizations that would allow someone to thrive, it's about a fair opportunity to advance. It's about giving people an equal opportunity to thrive in an environment where we can't, in fact, guarantee outcomes.

And as managers and as leaders, our job is to be equity-minded. We look for barriers to that fairness, and we try to proactively remove them. So, that's how I define it, particularly in an organizational context.

[03:00] **Scott:** Alex, grateful that you're here. Welcome to the show. How would you, sort of, add on to that definition and thinking about it from the broader Rice University perspective?

[03:09] **Alex:** One way that I would define it in the history of the university and where the university is located in Texas and in Texas in the United States, one way I like to approach it is through two, kind of, old-fashioned words. Like, I am the vice provost of DEI, but another way to talk about it in ways that, I think, spans generations and helps people understand how ideas take on different ways of describing them, and now a way that we describe a rather old idea in the history of our university and in this state and in the country, is DEI is what it means to move closer to or to arrive at the small “d” democracy that we aspire to, right? That's what it means in the history of this university and in the history of our country.

One of the older ways we have tended to that is...oh, doggone it, I should have practiced my Latin before I came on. So, I'm not going to try it. I'm going to do it in English, right? Part of it is the motto of the nation that we see on our currency, out of many, one, right? And what does it mean to make, out of many, one in a way that doesn't diminish the many, in a way that makes room for the opinions and the diversity of feeling and thought of the many, and in a way that provides justice and equity in being one and within those disagreements? I think that's a way that allows us to talk about where we've arrived now with this acronym of DEI in a way that connects it to our broader histories.

[05:15] **Scott:** Thank you, Alex, Connie, super helpful for setting the stage. I'd be interested to know, maybe, Alex, starting with you, you touched on it a little bit, but, sort of, that historical context matters. Can you talk about, when you took on the role, what was, kind of, the landscape of DEI at Rice at the time?

[05:34] **Alex:** So, at Rice at the time, right, we have a, we have a... I should answer the question, but I'm going to go back just a little, right? That there is a powerful DEI notion in the founding of the university, right? We had folks who are recognized as the late 19th and early 20th century founders of this university, who deign to believe that people of slender means, poor people, should have access to and a right to the highest form, the most exacting form of higher education, that there should be a great and demanding university in the city of Houston and in the state of Texas, and that that university should be open to people, not based on their ability to pay for it, but on their, on their intellect and their performance.

That idea in the early 20th century came along with the quite racist idea, the fundamentally racist and anti-democratic idea, that only White citizens would have that privilege. But I would be at a loss and mistaken, to be true to the origins of the university, without mentioning both of those — the small “d” democratic aspirations that exist at its start, but also, the great distance between those aspirations and the actual realization of them.

So, my way of talking about DEI at the university is how we advance from that powerful but limited idea into much more expansive ones. And by the time we arrive in 2020, we had passed several of those milestones, right? So, in 1964, we have the admission of the first Black students on campus and what I would argue, and what me and Caleb McDaniel and people on the Task Force for Slavery, Segregation, and Racial Injustice have argued, is in the mid-1960s, we have a refounding of the university on a more small “d” democratic basis.

By the time we reach 2020, we have a long history of democratizing programs to be proud of and excited about. There's a small office of diversity and inclusion. There's an office of multicultural affairs, starts as an office of minority affairs, focused on minority and multicultural student life on campus. The charge of what becomes the office of DEI is to take where we were in 2020 and think through ways to continue this journey that we've been on and to expand its offerings in what we hope would be some powerful ways.

[08:41] **Scott:** Really helpful, contextual landscape. Because I think one of the things we want to get to, particularly, for this episode is what we call, kind of, an “Up Next” view of things. And

so, kind of, drawing that line out further and want to come back and explore what's working well, when, kind of, the small “d” democratic activities are working, what does that look like.

Connie, I'd be curious, from your perspective, as you've, kind of, stepped into this DEI-centric role for Rice Business, tell us a little bit about just some of the context, as you've stepped into that role, what that landscape looked like, some of the challenges that were immediately in front of you.

[09:18] **Connie:** So, I would say that the context for all of this is that there was much discussion, even before I was in this role, just in business circles about, you know, the business case for DEI. And I won't get involved in the details of that discussion here, but we'll say that, I think, most people have landed on the literature that's empirical, that suggests that there are higher forms of organizational performance that come from diverse populations of employees in business for teams that work in those businesses, and there's a direct connection between that business case for performance and creativity and innovation that connects to what our mission is as a business school.

And so, for that reason, I'm always delighted to be able to say that, if I were to talk about the history of DEI at Rice Business, as I do when I meet other people in my role at other institutions, I tell them that it didn't actually start in 2020 when a lot of this activity became very active, I would say, in business schools. We started, actually, Dean Rodriguez launched the Diversity and Inclusion Office in 2016. At the time, it was focused, appropriately so, I think, on making sure that we elevate diversity and inclusion within our students as a primary stakeholder, as future leaders that we're sending out into the world to be those inclusive leaders to elevate the performance of those organizations.

And I would say that was, sort of, phase one. Phase two was that inflection point that many institutions went through in business schools across the country and the world with the backdrop of the murder of George Floyd. We also had a task force that Dean Rodriguez launched. I was a part of that task force. I didn't lead it, but I was on it. We put forth a number of recommendations to the dean. One of those was, in fact, I have dean-level leadership for DEI. I accepted that appointment some months later.

The other thing that was really critical, I think, about how our work evolved from that inflection point is that we understand very clearly that it's not just our students that should be the target of our work. We have a very clear mission. And that started with my appointment to make sure

that we embrace faculty, staff, students, alumni, and in fact, the greater Houston community in which we're situated.

And I would suggest that, in my first three years in this inaugural role, we have clearly expanded. We have five strategic pillars that guide our work that were put forth by that task force. We've expanded the staff to be able to better develop programming to address those various stakeholders. So, I'm looking forward to talking about what that next phase might look like, as we deepen and broaden our impact.

[11:58] **Scott:** Alex, I wanted to ask, kind of, a specific question. In 2019, the former president of Rice, David Leebron, commissioned the Rice University Task Force on Slavery, Segregation, and Racial Injustice. And I was curious if you could just talk about its mission and some of the learnings, maybe, that came out of that.

[12:19] **Alex:** So, I would encourage everyone who's listening to just Google, "Rice Task Force." That usually does it. That will get you to the Task Force on Slavery, Segregation, and Racial Injustice. It was a community project of the university, a presidentially-appointed task force that Caleb McDaniel in the history department and myself chaired. But the task force itself was more than 20 folks representing current students, alumni, other faculty, staff, former trustees of the university.

And the charge of the task force was threefold: to organize conversations around the history of slavery, segregation, and racial injustice at the university, to begin to write the history of the university in regard to slavery, segregation, and racial injustice, and lastly, to make recommendations to the president and to the university about ways forward to addressing the present manifestations of the historical consequences of slavery, segregation, and racial injustice in the history of the university.

If you go to the final report of the task force, it's the beginning of an interpretation, a new, in many ways, a new interpretation of the history of the university that we now inhabit, which is a university that we argue, in some really important ways comes online to mix new language with old language, comes online in the mid-1960s and focuses on the people who begin that work.

But before that, it also pays really close attention to the ways in which the origins of the university are bound up in some really powerful ways with the history of slavery in Texas and in the United States. It's an important question to ask of all the, what I would call the great 20th century universities. What are the origins of the fortunes that lay at the foundation of the great

20th century universities, places like Chicago, Stanford, Rice? It's possible to neglect those origins, and folks who look at the final report will come away with our best work, the university's best work on its origins.

[15:06] **Scott:** Love that. Yeah, this discussion about, kind of, elevating, but also illuminating and, sort of, recontextualizing. And I think all that's really important. It, sort of, leads me to a part of the conversation around, kind of, misconceptions about DEI. Like, you guys have been in your respective roles for a few years now. What kind of misconceptions persist? You're having conversations with and engaging with people. Maybe, I'll describe it, sort of, across a spectrum of DEI awareness and understanding and education.

[15:38] **Alex:** This is a great question. It's the question that I would imagine everyone in the audience already has answers to. But one of the misconceptions about DEI is, really, a misconception that cuts at the heart of the purpose of the university, right? There's a misconception that knowing a thing is damaging, right? Knowing a thing, understanding facts, understanding our past, getting a firmer grasp on what happened is problematic. And there is a strain of anti-DEI, or I would call anti, in some ways, small "d" democratic approach to knowledge, that injects a not inconsiderable amount of energy to keeping people from knowing things, knowing their past, and even knowing their future.

And so, that's not, as a direct answer, what is a misconception, but it is a problematic approach to DEI. And I think it is the most problematic one for folks who believe in universities and what their, what their purposes are. If you believe in universities, you need to pause and be very careful around people who are making arguments about DEI that want to control what people know and learn.

I think the other approaches that are problematic are ones that ignore the power of us. I should cite Heather McGhee's *The Sum of Us*, right, approaches to DEI that make the argument that knowing who we are individually in all of our diversity is problematic to us moving ahead together. Folks who make the argument that calling out difference, that paying attention to difference, gets in the way of collective action and collective progress. I think that's, also, a quite not uncommon response to DEI work. When people want to turn away from understanding what's different about us, thinking that understanding what's different about us keeps us from uniting. I think most folks who are small "d" democrats would make the argument that you understand difference so that you can address it, so you can work better together, so that you can move more forthrightly into justice.

[18:24] **Scott:** Connie, anything that stands out to you that you would want to add?

[18:28] **Connie:** I'll take it from two different vantage points. One, I've already addressed, and so I'll spend less time on that. And that is this concept of equity is somehow thought to be robbing one group of something and giving it to another, and fixing the game and controlling the outcomes and all of these negative connotations.

And as I suggested earlier, there's quite a bit of a difference between the concepts of equity and equality. And if we think about the role of justice in all of this and procedural justice versus distributive justice, if we think about procedural justice and process and due process and fair process and fair access and creating opportunities for every person to thrive, that doesn't necessarily mean that everyone is going to land equally in the same place, but we need an equal opportunity to do that. And I think people don't quite get the concept of equity and what it's trying to accomplish, and that it is not about keeping other people from getting something that they're due.

I think the other misconception is completely on the other side of, potentially, what I would call arguments for and against DEI. And I'm going to address this thing of allyship, because I've come to realize in these first three years of my position in this role, the word, "ally," is very powerful. It's one that people who are supportive of DEI want to be associated with. We encourage people to be, in fact, great allies. But I hear a lot of people self-anointing as an ally, and I just have to say that I find it really a misconception, a big one, that an ally is simply a morally good person who voices support for DEI or just doesn't stand in the way of it.

An ally, in a lot of the work that's being done in business around this, is around the work of being a change agent within organizations. It's action-oriented. It's someone who is knowledgeable and action-oriented around that knowledge. So, they take their awareness and their understanding and their empathy and all that most people believe makes them an ally alone, and they put that into action by identifying ways that they can, in fact, identify systemic biases, identify injustices and processes, and actually do something to fix that.

And so, an ally is much more than this passive vocal supporter. And so, for the listeners, I would caution you against self-anointment as an ally. I think that people who are underserved, who have been excluded historically or currently can better tell you whether or not you're acting as an ally than you self-anointing as an ally. So, I think I just got one of my big beefs out there, Scott. So, for the world to hear.

[21:11] **Scott:** Thank you, Connie. Very helpful. Alex, can you talk just a bit about how your work together has impacted and reinforced one another?

[21:22] **Alex:** I took on as someone who, when I entered the liberal arts university, I'm someone who brought a certain number of preconceptions with me. Some of those were around what were the appropriate topics of study for a liberal arts education.

And so, the younger version of me always thought, the harder it was to make a direct case for the immediate usefulness of a discipline, the more clearly it belonged at the heart of the liberal arts university, right? People struggle to make that case for English, so, it's in, right? People struggle to make the case for history. In, right? Those are... like, people don't typically struggle to make the case for business. So, I'm, you know, I'm highly skeptical, right?

And that's partially a joke, right? But in my advice to my children about what to study, right, I would often lean into arguments for, "No, you don't... no, business isn't anything you study as an undergraduate. Maybe, you'll do that later. But no, you don't go to school to study business."

And I never...this may tell you too much, but I never really tested that. I didn't talk to a lot of business professors to test it until I met Connie. And Connie made short work of it. And part of what she helped me see so clearly and so quickly was the interdisciplinary nature of the field and the ways in which the disciplines that I held in such high regard were part and parcel of what it meant to study business.

And we just so happen to be having these conversations. I didn't have them in time for my first kid, but I did have these conversations in time for my second kid, right? And so, I'm grateful for that.

[23:21] **Scott:** Love that. Thank you, Alex. Connie, anything from your experience and working with Alex over the last couple of years that you'd like to share?

[23:28] **Connie:** Yes, because as Alex was speaking, I took a couple notes because my brain just can't function without taking notes. And I've been taking notes on everything Alex has been talking about today. But I just want to say that, to double down on Alex, suggesting to the listeners that they reach out to read the reports from his task force. Alex invited me to participate in what he, at the time, had going, a series of DocTalks. And he asked me to read the most recent of those reports before that DocTalk. And I can tell you that, and which is why

I'm encouraging people to read it, it's a long report but beautifully done. So beautifully done. And I was moved by it.

First of all, I'm not from Texas. I learned a lot. I learned a lot about Rice. I learned a lot about Houston. I learned a lot about Texas. I learned a lot from that report. So, now, I know what all these street names are all about, as I go around. That's just a side benefit. But the real benefit is that I was completely moved, learning about the history of this university. I felt that, after reading that report, I had a better understanding, because I'm not an alumnus of this university, I have a better understanding of what it is like and what it was like to be at this university at different points historically in time.

So, it's quite a moving thing. And I have such an appreciation for the amount of work that Alex, Caleb, and whoever else was on the task force... I don't know the entire task force that worked on it, I'm sorry, because if I start naming more, then I'll miss someone. But the labor that it must have been, the labor of love that it was, and also, probably, how painful it was as they were uncovering some of this as well. And so, I just really have an appreciation for his work as a scholar, while also doing the administrative work that it takes to run the office. And not many, but there are those who will, but there are not many that appreciate that those are two entirely different jobs — two entirely different roles that take a lot of time.

So, I've loved that, and I've enjoyed the opportunity to work with Alex, see his team grow. And he's got some great team members there that are already doing amazing things to elevate DEI across the university. So, I just want to say that.

[25:43] **Scott:** Thank you. No, very clear call to action. I love that. As we, kind of, wrap up, I want to just ask, kind of, the looking ahead question, aspirations for the future of diversity, equity, and inclusion at Rice University, at Rice Business, plans to continue to advance those efforts. Also curious about plans for Juneteenth celebrations that are coming up this year. Take us into the future. What are some of the things that you're thinking about, excited about? We'll close it out in that way. Maybe, Connie, do you want to start? And we'll close out with Alex.

[26:13] **Connie:** So, I would say there are three things that I'd like to see in this next phase. I'll call it phase four. I don't know how many phases we'll have. I guess the dean will tell me how many phases I've got. But in the next three years, I have this vision that we're going to do three things. We're going to deepen our impact. That means... I told my team this. We have a couple of retreats a year. We have a lot of good things going now. What I want to make sure that we do is deepen the impact of what we're doing. It's not about more. It's about depth and impact.

With the existing initiatives that we have, there's some that we want to take that to the next level.

The second thing that we want to do is expand programming to embrace what is a growing school, a growing population of students. We have just launched an undergraduate major. That's brought a lot of new folks into our school. We already have an amazing MAcc program and an amazing leader of that MAcc program who has had diversity at the forefront of his mind all along. We have doctoral students that are the future faculty, that are coming through our program. We are expanding our programming to make sure that we include them, as well as the plethora of our MBA students who were, prior to the past couple of years, the focus of a lot of our efforts.

So, that's a really big number two thing that I want to see us do. And we're already doing it, by the way. We've had undergraduate activity already through our office last fall. We're having something else in a couple of weeks. So, it's already underway, but I, we'll see that grow.

The third thing, and it's really critical, and we had to start elsewhere. But now that we're moving on through those five stakeholders, we are going to be a much more active partner with the community. We're working on an initiative that I talked about... I'll segue into Juneteenth so seamlessly for Alex. I talked about this two Juneteenths ago. And we are wanting to support small business owners who are from historically underserved populations of owners. We know that access to capital, access to knowledge, educational resources that can help those businesses take their operation to the next level, we know that there are holes to fill. We also know that there are organizations that are already in the community that have been doing this good work. We don't want to displace those organizations. We want to support them, too. So, we want to be a strong collaborative participant in that small business ecosystem to support underserved and historically excluded populations of small business owners. And that's something I really feel strongly about. So, those are three things that I see for our next phase.

[28:48] **Alex:** So, a couple of things, Scott. One of things we have to continue to do in our office is expand important areas of expertise. This also gets at, I think, your question about misconceptions about DEI. For example, it was my pleasure to write this morning to the six semifinalists for the position of director of religious diversity and pluralism, which is a new director position in the office. It's an area we were not completely without expertise, but we need more focused expertise on religious diversity and non-religion and pluralism in our office. And so, that's a direction that we're expanding right now. And to expand our conversations around the importance of free expression, NDEI, or to put it in a way that we have long put it,

free expression and democracy. That's a conversation that we need. We can benefit from expanding at the university.

And the last thing that we need to do, particularly, as we get closer and closer to a new university strategic plan is that we need to, like, go, ready, get set. That will provide, I hope, more impetus for our office, now that we've some things that we felt like needed to be done in a hurry, now to pause and be more strategic about where we go next and how we go along with what I know will be an inspiring and promising new strategic plan for the university.

And you said, what's on tap for Juneteenth? Here's what we're trying to do, Scott. So, if you show up at Juneteenth, and this isn't it, I don't, I don't know, but here, Scott's breaking news. So, this is what we're, this is what we're working on. We're working on gathering some of the early university-wide Black student leaders on campus. We've got a great group of folks working on it. And so, that... we hope that will be our focus, to continue some of our conversations from last year around Black leadership, but in a, in a different way.

[31:18] **Scott:** Love that. Alex, Connie, it's really been a privilege to be here with you today. Thank you so much for the work that you're doing, for your candor in taking us through this journey. Really appreciate you coming on the show.

[31:29] **Connie:** Thank you.

[31:30] **Alex:** Thank you.

[31:32] **Scott:** Thanks for listening. This has been Owl Have You Know, a production of Rice Business. You can find more information about our guests, hosts, and announcements on our website, business.rice.edu.

Please, subscribe and leave a rating wherever you find your favorite podcasts. We'd love to hear what you think. The hosts of Owl Have You Know are myself, Scott Gale, and Maya Pomroy.