

RECONNECTING IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT TO EXPECT AND WHAT TO AVOID AS WE RE-ENTER

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Since we have returned to in-person classes, meetings, and gatherings, we have the opportunity to re-evaluate the spaces we are returning to and how these spaces have been impacted by COVID-19. One of the biggest mistakes we can make during the 2021-2022 school year is believing that classroom settings and staff gatherings will be the same (or even that they “should” be the same) as they were pre-pandemic.

How are educators and leaders preparing for this shift? Leaders may be questioning what the process will look and feel like as we return to sharing physical spaces. As this occurs it is important to discuss what measures are being taken to create not only a sense of belonging, but true belonging for students and staff of color. In the summer of 2020, there were countless corporations, institutions, and businesses making statements in support of Black lives ([Livingston, 2020](#)). Committees were created and implemented in the hopes of educating a society that has long been avoiding the truth about our nation’s history: slavery, indigenous massacres, and stolen lands. There are some who are just beginning to comprehend the implications of the cost of colonization and what that really meant for our country. We have been presented a history that has been “whitewashed” ([King, 2019](#); [Wenger, 2021](#)). School districts have ignored an accurate presentation of the accomplishments of marginalized populations for decades, choosing instead a primary focus of euro-centric movements and endeavors ([Mineo, 2020](#)).

There are those who are filled with excitement as we regather and others who may be filled with anxiety and apprehension. There must be constant acknowledgment and dialogue around how students and staff are processing throughout the school year, as well as discussion regarding ways to make everyone feel as safe as much as possible. As we continue to rebuild on-campus life, it is vital to prepare and implement ways that we can change the narrative of how we gather and practice inclusion. We can foster inclusion and understanding by:

Acknowledging and Thinking Ahead

One of the most harmful things we can do is pretend there has not been a shift in society. During the first year of the pandemic, the documented murder of George Floyd and the landmark social upheaval that followed became a worldwide focus. Unresolved historical racism in the United States, echoed by marches calling for equality, reveals the mirage of a post-racial America. This has allowed us to see clear social inequities and disparities linked to historical actions, which disproportionately affect marginalized populations. If we continue to overlook social issues such as voter suppression, criminal justice reform, and systemic inequality in education, with no acknowledgment of what has occurred in the past, it will be difficult to bolster awareness.

Many of us want to push forward towards justice, however, as staff and faculty, we must also be mindful of the language we use and the possibility of microaggressions. Microaggressions are slight comments or questions, that express unintentional bias or racism, sexism, or other forms of discrimination. A question such as “where are you really from?” Or a comment stating “I don’t see color” are examples of microaggressions. It is essential that we understand what microaggressions are and work to circumvent these discriminatory actions. Bias and even increased incidences of xenophobia, as well as a recent nationwide backlash against Critical Race Theory continues to enforce systemic oppression and hinder conversations on racism ([Sawchuck, 2021](#)). At this stage of the pandemic, it is important to have a heightened awareness of where our nation is and the tasks that are before us. Leaders should consider addressing social issues with the intent of advancing the narrative.

Marginalized people are often burdened with the “emotional labor” that comes with educating others. Examples of such labor include BIPOC professionals wondering if they are going to continually be asked to speak on their experiences of oppression, be subjected to unexpected microaggressions, correct historical misinformation, or shoulder the work of living in a diverse and inclusive society. Questions of belonging and acceptance often circulate and can translate into feelings of insecurity and self-doubt. Good leaders and educators will be intentional about equity and be prepared to have open dialogue and discussions. With that dialogue comes comprehension and understanding, so when injustice takes place, we will not be overcome by confusion but rather be better prepared for considerate and empathetic responses. Our ability to acknowledge this and implement specific ways to create environments on our campuses that are prepared to address racial issues is key ([Asare, 2021](#)).

Putting the Work into Practice

In the summer of 2020, there were numerous books, podcasts, and different forms of learning that offered advice and information around race ([Daniels, Gonchar & Proulx, 2021](#); [King, 2020](#); [NEA, 2020](#); [Opportunity Agenda, 2020](#)). As we embark on our re-entry, it is vital that we all make conscious efforts of applying the knowledge and putting it into action. This requires a huge amount of self-awareness and trust. If we desire to serve one another beyond required institutional and organizational training, we must put our work into practice. Some of these strategies involve acts as simple as learning the correct pronunciation of a student’s or colleague’s name. Take the time to ask yourself: Is this how I pronounce their name? Or is it a name that I decided was best for them? Also, holding yourself accountable—if there is a mistake made, apologize, and have the courage to change and try not to repeat the behavior.

We must continually undo harm and unlearn racist behaviors. This is a part of the practice that begins the repair. It is necessary that we take responsibility to advance belonging and recognize this as a sign of leadership. We can discuss strategies and ways to be better as much as we want, but once we make the choice of how to interact and acknowledge those around us, meeting that goal should matter and take place with consistency. Ultimately, the words, conversations, and statements need to equate to genuine actions of change. This translates into making conscious decisions with intent for the betterment of those we are impacting.

Preparing Environments for Success

We have the chance to strategically prepare environments for consistent in-person interactions, and this is needed as we continue to regather while we are still amid a global pandemic. Preparation is more than coincidence or an accident, it is the necessary identification of a purposeful mission and goals for the future. It hinges on passion and is shaped and formed by skill sets and continual improvement of who you are. It does not mean perfection. This is an important distinction because prepared individuals learn from mistakes and recognize they are growing. We prepare carefully in every area of our lives; therefore, social and emotional development must be nurtured as well. The information is available so we must use it.

It is imperative that we take the time to solve issues and have deliberate investment in preparation. Taking time to continue engaging in materials related to race that help educators grow as they relate with colleagues and students, as well as continued trainings and webinars are effective ways to prepare. Important questions to ask include: how are educators preparing their classrooms? What expectations are being set? Equally, what can be referred to when these standards are not met? Take the time to know who you are impacting and how you can better serve those around you. Throughout the semester, spend time in discussion with colleagues and students to gauge if there are changes that need to be made, or if the environment created is one that students feel secure and comfortable in.

We should consider the following as a summary of recommendations to be better prepared as we all reconnect:

1. Acknowledge where we are and seek to become better prepared.
2. Apologize when we make mistakes and use these as opportunities to grow and become better.
3. Take advantage of learning opportunities to increase our understanding and develop our knowledge base.
4. Establish standards that we aspire to and do the work to achieve and observe them.

We have a continued opportunity to help create the world we want to live in. This school year, like any other, will continue to present new obstacles but also create new opportunities. The time is now to widen our lens and embrace the prospect of creating spaces where equity and awareness can truly live. Many of us have been operating from a crisis mode where a significant amount of time has been spent navigating, shifting, and overseeing, rather than leading and guiding those around us. Whether identifying as students or colleagues, people want and need to be seen as valued. They want to feel a sense of belonging, inclusivity, and respect. Although increased technology-based learning provides new innovations into our society, we cannot continue in-person learning as it was, simply hoping for change. There must be a heightened awareness with improvements, and equally, grace, and understanding.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Leah J. Foster is a second year Higher Educational Leadership Ed.D. student at Texas Christian University (TCU) in Fort Worth, TX. She currently works in athletics, and is passionate about providing students with the skills needed to work closely and productively with people from all different backgrounds. Her desire is to assist young people in the next stages of life through transformational learning; conduct and publish research in athletics reform, dialogue as an inclusion strategy, and African-American issues.

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