Bringing DEI into the Core of Our Institutions

By Modupe Akinola , Columbia Business School; Zoe Kinias , INSEAD; Michael Norton , Harvard Business School; and Benjamin Kessler , George Mason University

Implementing DEI concepts effectively in business-school classrooms requires support from both institutions and the wider community.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is making inroads in business schools, including the core curriculum. This encouraging trend enriches our institutions by giving future business leaders the tools they'll need to build thriving and inclusive organisations in the global economy. Yet because these concepts are relatively new additions to business-school classrooms, deploying them effectively may require help from both institutions and a wider community of experienced peers.

In 2019, the late Katherine W. Philips brought 15 leading scholars representing top global business schools together for a three-day workshop on integrating DEI principles into business education. Since her passing in 2020, the expanded group – organised by Modupe Akinola (Columbia Business School), Zoe Kinias (INSEAD), Michael Norton (Harvard Business School) and Erin Kelly (MIT-Sloan) – continues to meet several times per year

to honour Philip's vision and discuss the challenges and successes of teaching and institutionalising DEI in the classroom and beyond.

2022 saw the resumption of the in-person working group at Columbia Business School (CBS) after a shift to Zoom during Covid-19. Ongoing initiatives for the DEI working group include academic papers, case studies, teaching notes, and more in-person conferences.

A few months after the get-together at CBS, the group aggregated its collective learnings and worked with Stephanie Creary (Wharton), Tianna Barnes (University of Pennsylvania), Christopher Petsko (Duke University), Ashleigh Shelby Rossette (Duke University) and Ayana Younge (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) to create a professional development workshop in conjunction with the 2022 **Academy of Management** conference in Seattle. This workshop was the first step in spreading the working group's shared knowledge to a broader audience.

> "Teaching DEI can cause self-doubt. But we have to persevere. What we're doing is far too important not to. It's not that it stays in the classroom; it can end up in the boardroom, influencing thousands of lives." – Modupe Akinola

Here we discuss important takeaways gleaned from both gatherings.

Classroom techniques for increasing awareness

Akinola showed how CBS students used **Poll Everywhere**, an online interactive tool, to assemble a catalogue of statements from their classmates that made them uncomfortable in the past. Viewed onscreen within the software's spreadsheet-like interface, the statements could be unpacked and examined in a format geared toward mutual understanding.

Similarly, one workshop attendee described her response when a student referred to a guest speaker – a prominent and highly successful Black woman – as "articulate." She could have let the comment pass, but instead created a teachable moment. In a private session, she explained to the student that the word he chose could be seen as reinforcing social stereotypes since it would probably not be used for an equally accomplished speaker of non-marginalised identity. Later, the student, having reflected on

this, stood up in class and delivered an apology.

The ensuing discussion pointed up several other possible responses to problematic comments. For example, educators could ask: "What did you mean by that?" or "Why did that come to your mind first?" or "I'm going to let you try that again." Several colleagues cited humour as a key ingredient for calling out instances of often-unconscious bias without suppressing open conversations.

Of course, misconduct that threatens other students and faculty or compromises their safety demands swift, zero-tolerance response. A supportive institution that treats these offenses with the seriousness they deserve is essential to DEI work.

Maintaining the "learning zone"

Stephanie Creary's classroom mantra is "don't dominate – facilitate." Instructors should allow for various perspectives but know when to move on. When in doubt, they can transform tension into a teachable moment by inviting more voices into the discussion.

Kinias shared how awareness of self and the group can help mitigate challenges that go along with working in this space. She recommended that participants pay attention to their "learning zone" where they are fully present and activated for exploration, rather than stay in a "safety zone" where they are too comfortable, or a "panic zone" causing "fight, flight or freeze" responses. In panic-ridden environments, it is often necessary to take a step back and regroup to re-establish psychological safety.

When professors must learn

But what happens when *educators* are perceived to have said or done something that contradicts DEI principles?

For faculty who need to overcome self-consciousness or negative self-image, Erika Hall, assistant professor of organisation and management at Emory University, demonstrated a classroom exercise illustrating how false meta stereotypes – beliefs about how others regard us – influence how we show up in the world.

Inspired by the long-running US game show *Family Feud*, in which contestants try to guess the most popular responses to survey questions, Hall divided attendees into small groups and asked each group to produce a

list of widely held opinions of DEI educators. The results comprised a litany of self-satirising putdowns (e.g. "preachy"). As Hall revealed, however, people outside academia described DEI practitioners far more positively. When Hall runs this exercise in the classroom, she uses "Gen Z" or some other context-appropriate label, achieving the same result. The exercise could be extended to groups ranging from MBAs to corporate executives.

Find article at

https://knowledge.insead.edu/responsibility/bringing-dei-core-our-institutions

About the author(s)

Modupe Akinola   is an Associate Professor of Management at Columbia Business School. She is the Barbara and David Zalaznick Professor of Business and faculty director of the Sanford C. Bernstein & Co. Center for Leadership and Ethics.

Zoe Kinias was an Associate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD and the founding Academic Director of INSEAD's **Gender Initiative**. She is the programme director for the **INSEAD Gender Diversity Programme**, an INSEAD Executive Education online programme.

Michael Norton   is the Harold M. Brierley Professor of Business Administration at the Harvard Business School and a member of Harvard's Behavioral Insights Group.

Benjamin Kessler is a research communications and outreach officer at George Mason University School of Business. He was the managing editor of INSEAD Knowledge.

About the series

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

As society increasingly demands more inclusive leadership and culture, INSEAD is actively studying and engaging business leaders and practitioners on anti-racism, gender balance and other key topics related to creating fairer, more representative organisations. In this series, INSEAD faculty and their close collaborators with rich experience in practice give their insights and suggestions on how to develop diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in businesses and organisations.

Gender Initiative

The **INSEAD Gender Initiative** integrates research, business and pedagogy to engage the full potential of both women and men.

Its community of gender researchers conduct cutting-edge research on the experiences and impact of women in business and society. The initiative builds relationships with organisations to enhance their commitment to gender balance and their ability to fulfil this goal. It further strives to create a pipeline of future business leaders who are passionate and equipped to drive gender balance within their existing and future organisations.

Its mission is to create and disseminate knowledge that advances women leaders and optimises their contributions within and beyond their organisations. The Gender Initiative strives to engage both men and women in this effort, inspiring all to take action.