

Grand Challenge # 5: Diversity & Equity in Higher Education: Are We Fair and Just?

In the fall of 2015, the University of Missouri-Columbia became a flashpoint for conversations and confrontations about race and inequities on college campuses and in society. Student protests, a hunger strike, the football team boycott, viral videos and a lackluster administrative response all led to a crisis that has left the university damaged politically, financially and academically. This crisis did not happen all of a sudden, but was the culmination of a series of seemingly minor and unrelated incidents occurring over a long period of time. Similar confrontations followed on college campuses throughout the country well into the next year.

While race was a driving factor at Missouri, questions of inequity touch most of our lives, whether they involve gender, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, disabilities, age, religious beliefs, legal status and more. Inequity, simply put, is a lack of fairness and justice. When one's "diverse" characteristic becomes the basis for unfairness and injustice, an inequity has occurred. In practice, this can mean inequitable access to opportunities, services and resources such as jobs, promotions, housing, and capital. In higher education, inequities can exist in access to graduate faculty, courses, internships and scholarships, promotion and tenure, funding, facilities, equipment, grants and contracts, and much more.

Do inequities exist in the land-grant system? Regarding student access (see Grand Challenge #6)? Will they have access to #6 at their tables to read?, a survey found that 87% of public-university presidents and provosts said they feared that access for low-income and nonwhite students was being jeopardized by budget cuts and tuition increases.¹ Data from a 2005 nationwide survey of land-grant agricultural scientists found significant gender inequality despite few gender differences in scientists' human capital, professional networking, means of scientific production, and research productivity. The study's most robust gender related finding was differences in scientists' doctoral training, farming experience, and ties to private industry.² How we handle other campus issues such as sexual violence against women, ADA compliant facilities and technologies, mental health services, and religious or academic freedoms just to name a few, raises questions for us all.

At the system level, smaller 1862 State institutions, 1890 Historically Black institutions, 1994 Tribal institutions, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and Non-Land Grant Colleges of Agriculture all seek equitable access to federal, state and private opportunities to fulfill their respective land-grant missions. Yet the reality is that "the system" favors large-capacity institutions, and funding disparities are significant and pervasive. Likewise, a competition for scarce federal and state funding pits research priorities against teaching and Extension priorities in a seemingly zero-sum game of winners and losers. The land-grant system has the capacity, opportunity, and perhaps the moral obligation to respond to inequalities both on campus and at the system level. The question is, will it?

How will the land-grant system respond to this challenge?

¹ de Vise, Daniel. June 22, 2012. At 150, land-grant public universities struggle to return to roots. *Washington Post*.

² Goldberger, Jessica and Jessica Crowe. 2010. Gender Inequality within the U.S. Land-Grant Agricultural Sciences Professoriate. *International Journal of Gender, Science and Technology*, Vol.2, No.3:334-360.