



## Diversity Definitions That Everyone Should Know

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There are a common set of key diversity terms that higher educational leaders must be familiar with to better understand the complexities of diversity. It's implied that a familiarity with these definitions will enable one to communicate and articulate diversity issues in a way that will enhance the overall diversity dialogue.

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### Introduction

The following terms typically appear in most literature discussing diversity. These definitions are by no means exhaustive, and some might be more general than others especially due to the contested meanings of certain terms. Indeed terms such as 'multiculturalism', or 'diversity', might not be defined the same way across disciplines, and part of the debate in the literature and in academic circles pertains to the contested meanings of these terms. Regardless if you have a working knowledge of these terms you'll be able to engage more fully in the dialogue.

**Affirmative action:** Positive steps taken to increase the representation of women and designated minorities in areas of employment, education, and business from which they have been historically excluded, (Fullinwider, 2011).

**ALANA:** Acronym for African-Latino-Asian-Native American. (University of Vermont, n.d.)

**Campus climate:** Behaviors within a workplace or learning environment, ranging from subtle to cumulative to dramatic, that can influence whether an individual feels personally safe, listened to, valued, and treated fairly and with respect, (Campus Climate Network Group, 2004).

Such a climate is everyone's responsibility, and includes fostering a climate of civility and respect for others, elimination of discrimination, and providing easy access to redress, if needed. The campus climate, though difficult to quantify or change, sets the tone for successful recruitment and retention of students, faculty, staff and administration.

**Cosmopolitanism:** The word 'cosmopolitan', which derives from the Greek word kosmopolitês ('citizen of the world'), has been used to describe a wide variety of important views in moral and socio-political philosophy. The nebulous core shared by all cosmopolitan views is the idea that all human beings, regardless of their political affiliation, do (or at least can) belong to a single community, and that this community should be cultivated, (Kleingeld and Brown, 2011).

**Cultural competence:** There is no one definition of cultural competence. Definitions of cultural competence have evolved from diverse perspectives, interests and needs and are incorporated in state legislation, federal statutes and programs, private sector organizations



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and academic settings. The seminal work of Cross et al in 1989 offered a definition of cultural competence that established a solid foundation for the field. The definition has been widely adapted and modified during the past 15 years. However, the core concepts and principles espoused in this framework remain constant as they are viewed as universally applicable across multiple systems. (National Center for Cultural Competence, n.d.)

### **Cultural competence requires that organizations:**

- Have a defined set of values and principles, and demonstrate behaviors, attitudes, policies, and structures that enable them to work effectively cross-culturally.
- Have the capacity to (1) value diversity, (2) conduct self-assessment, (3) manage the dynamics of difference, (4) acquire and institutionalize cultural knowledge, and (5) adapt to diversity and the cultural contexts of communities they serve.
- Incorporate the above in all aspects of policy-making, administration, practice and service delivery, systematically involve consumers, families and communities.

Cultural competence is a developmental process that evolves over an extended period. Both individuals and organizations are at various levels of awareness, knowledge and skills along the cultural competence continuum. (National Center for Cultural Competence, 1998, modified from Cross et al).

**Cultural competence for pre-service teachers:** refers to the dispositions of being aware of cultural differences, being culturally sensitive and able to respond to these differences appropriately, (Liang and Zhang, 2009).

**Culturally relevant pedagogy:** A culturally relevant pedagogy builds on the premise that “how people are expected to go about learning may differ across cultures. In order to maximize learning opportunities, teachers must gain knowledge of the cultures represented in their classrooms, then translate this knowledge into instructional practice,” (Villegas, 1991, p.13).

**Culturally relevant teaching:** is an approach that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impact knowledge, skills and attitudes (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

**Culturally responsive teaching:** is defined by Gay (2000) as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them; it teaches to and through the strengths of these students. Gay also describes culturally responsive teaching as having these characteristics:

- It acknowledges the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups, both as legacies that affect students’ dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning and



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as worthy content to be taught in the formal curriculum.

- It builds bridges of meaningfulness between home and school experiences as well as between academic abstractions and lived sociocultural realities.
- It uses a wide variety of instructional strategies that are connected to different learning styles.

**Disability:** Disability is a physical, mental, or cognitive impairment or condition that qualifies under federal and state disability nondiscrimination laws for special accommodations to ensure programmatic and physical access, (UC Berkeley Strategic Plan for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity, 2009).

**Discrimination:** Active behaviors, individual or institutional/systematic, that deliberately prevent certain demographic groups and individuals in those groups from participation in policy, design, and decision-making processes or cause harm to members of targeted demographic groups or individuals in those groups (University of Rhode Island, 2004).

**Diversity:** is a comprehensive term, inclusive of those identified as racial or ethnic minorities, those we identify as culturally different in any way (based on life style, values, economic circumstances, religion, sexual orientation, ability/disability, etc.) those who are frequently marginalized, and those we perceive as representative of the more mainstream culture (University of Rhode Island, 2004).

**“Authentic Diversity** exists when interactions between people are genuine, honest and real. It is a deeper, more personal activity that goes beyond representation, affirmative action and equal opportunity. It is diversity that takes place at the level of individual differences. We may disagree, we may argue and we may even be disappointed. At the end of the day, however, authentic diversity is about people listening, caring, respecting and valuing each other...not because we have to or because it is the right thing to do, but because we share a common humanity that compels us to do so,” (Dr. Jose Picart, Vice Provost for Diversity and African American Affairs-NC State University, 2007).

**Environmental equity:** Equal protection by environmental laws for all people; may include intent, implementation, and enforcement of laws,(University of Vermont, n.d.).

**Environmental justice:** Broader in scope than environmental equity; refers to those cultural norms and values, rules, regulations, behaviors, policies, and decisions to support sustainable communities, where people can interact with confidence that their environment is safe, nurturing, and productive, (University of Vermont, n.d.).



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**Environmental racism:** The unequal protection against toxic and hazardous waste exposure and the systematic exclusion of people of color from environmental decisions affecting their communities; refers to rules, regulations, decisions, or policies that target certain communities for least desirable land uses, (University of Vermont, n.d.).

**Ethnic group:** A group of people sharing a set of distinctive characteristics of language, values, customs, artistic expression, and family, (University of Vermont, n.d.).

**Equality of opportunity:** “is a political ideal that is opposed to caste hierarchy but not to hierarchy per se. The background assumption is that a society contains a hierarchy of more and less desirable, superior and inferior positions. Or there may be several such hierarchies. In a caste society, the assignment of individuals to places in the social hierarchy is fixed by birth. The child acquires the social status of his or her parents at least if their union is socially sanctioned. Social mobility may be possible in a caste society, but the process whereby one is admitted to a different level of the hierarchy is open only to some individuals depending on their initial ascriptive social status. In contrast, when equality of opportunity prevails, the assignment of individuals to places in the social hierarchy is determined by some form of competitive process, and all members of society are eligible to compete on equal terms.” (Arneson, 2008).

**Equity:** is the guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all students, faculty, and staff, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of some groups. (UC Berkeley Strategic Plan for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity, 2009).

**Excellence:** is the expectation and standard that whatever the University does in research, teaching, and public service is of the highest quality, is on the cutting edge, is methodologically rigorous, nourishes critical and creative thinking, and is responsive to all campus constituencies. (UC Berkeley Strategic Plan for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity, 2009).

**Gender:** is a socially constructed system of classification that ascribes qualities of masculinity and femininity to people. Gender characteristics can change over time and are different between cultures. Words that refer to gender include: man, woman, transgender, masculine, feminine, and gender queer. “Gender” also refers to one’s sense of self as masculine or feminine, regardless of external genitalia. Gender is often conflated with sex; however, this is inaccurate, because “sex” refers to bodies and “gender” refers to personality characteristics. (UC Berkeley Strategic Plan for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity, 2009).



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**Identity politics:** “The laden phrase “identity politics” has come to signify a wide range of political activity and theorizing founded in the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestoes, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context. Members of that constituency assert or reclaim ways of understanding their distinctiveness that challenge dominant oppressive characterizations, with the goal of greater self-determination,” (Heyes, 2009).

**Inclusion:** A concept of shared power. The ability or skill to include different constituencies in policy, design and decision-making processes. An environment can be diverse without being inclusive if a more mainstream group holds most, if not all of the power (University of Rhode Island, 2004).

**Inclusion** is the act of creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to fully participate. An inclusive and welcoming climate embraces differences and offers respect in words and actions for all people. Inclusion is a respectful way of creating value from the differences of all members of our community, in order to leverage talent and foster both individual and organizational excellence, (UC Berkeley Strategic Plan for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity, 2009).

**Inclusive Excellence:** “Inclusive Excellence re-envision both quality and diversity. It reflects a striving for excellence in higher education that has been made more inclusive by decades of work to infuse diversity into recruiting, admissions, and hiring; into the curriculum and co-curriculum; and into administrative structures and practices. It also embraces newer forms of excellence, and expanded ways to measure excellence, that take into account research on learning and brain functioning, the assessment movement, and more nuanced accountability structures. Inclusive Excellence is a multi-layered process through which we achieve excellence in learning; research and teaching; student development; institutional functioning; local and global community engagement; workforce development; and more. It is the active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity in ways that increase one’s awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways individuals interact within systems and institutions,” (Williams, et al, 2005).

**Institutional racism:** “Racism which is inherited in the apparatuses of the state and structures of society. It describes a systematic racism,” (Bourne, 2001). It can occur in institutions such as public government bodies, private business corporations (such as media outlets), and



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universities (public and private).

The term “**institutional racism**” describes societal patterns that have the net effect of imposing oppressive or otherwise negative conditions against identifiable groups on the basis of race or ethnicity. The term was coined by Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) during the late 1960s. Carmichael felt that it was important to distinguish personal bias, which has specific effects and can be identified and corrected relatively easily, with institutional bias, which is generally long-term and grounded more in inertia than in intent. Carmichael made this distinction because, he had grown tired of white moderates who felt that the primary purpose of the civil rights movement was white personal transformation. Carmichael’s primary concern was societal transformation. In the United States, institutional racism results from the social caste system that sustained, and was sustained by, slavery and racial segregation. Although the laws that enforced this caste system are no longer in place, its basic structure still stands to this day, (Head, n.d.).

**Marginalization:** The systematic and/or individual process, intentional or unintentional of making certain demographic groups’ issues and concerns low priorities, therefore decreasing visibility and opportunities for redress (University of Rhode Island, 2004).

**Multiculturalism:** The doctrine that several different cultures (rather than one national culture) can coexist peacefully and equitably in a single country (Princeton University, 2010).

**Multiculturalism** is a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society, (Rosado, 1997).

**Pluralism:** Pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity. Pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference. Pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences, even our religious differences, not in isolation, but in relationship to one another. The language of pluralism is that of dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism. Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences. Pluralism involves the commitment to being at the table — with one’s commitments, (Eck, 2006).



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**Reverse discrimination:** A term used to refer to the exclusion of a member of a majority class not commonly discriminated against, to compensate for traditional discrimination against a minority member. (Reverse discrimination, n.d.)

**Sexual orientation:** is the deep-seated direction of one's sexual attraction toward the same gender, opposite gender, or other genders. It is on a continuum and not a set of absolute categories. Sometimes it is referred to as "affection orientation." (UC Berkeley Strategic Plan for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity, 2009).

**Student-centered pedagogy:** The term, "learner or student-centered" describes a concept and a practice in which students and professors learn from one another. It proposes a global shift away from instruction that is fundamentally teacher-centered, at times glibly termed "sage on the stage," focusing instead on learning outcomes. It is not intended to diminish the importance of the instructional side of the classroom experience. Instead, instruction is broadened to include other activities that produce desirable learning outcomes. Student centered teachers articulate what they expect their students to learn, design educational experiences to advance their learning, and provide opportunities for them to demonstrate their success in achieving those expectations, (Armbruster et al., 2009).

**Underrepresentation:** The historical and systematic process, intentional or unintentional, that creates an environment in which the population of a certain demographic group, which exists at a certain proportion in the general population, is not proportionally represented at the institution, (University of Rhode Island, 2004).

**Underserved populations:** are ones that are disadvantaged in relation to other groups because of structural/societal obstacles and disparities. At UC Berkeley, "underserved" applies to accessibility to education, (UC Berkeley Strategic Plan for Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity, 2009).

### Conclusion

It's important to understand language and definitions because discourse has immense power to shape and mold ideas about the society that we live in. When one is able to critically analyze the concepts and jargon of the society, then one is in a better position to challenge the discourse. You know what they say, "knowledge is power."

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All references cited in this article can be found in the booklet: How to Create a Diversity Plan for your Institution by Dr. Charles A. Taylor. [You can get your copy here.](#)



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