

Taking an Outside-In Perspective on a Forward-Looking Academy

Nancy Cantor
Chancellor
Rutgers University - Newark¹

My Background

If you don't mind, I want to preface my remarks today with a bit about my background, as context for my comments. I am a social psychologist and have been an academic leader at both private and public institutions with a special focus on the value of diversity (for democracy and a prosperous society and I co-edit a book series with Earl Lewis on that topic). I am actively committed to the role of universities as engaged anchor institutions in their home communities and regions, and to showing how that local work resonates globally and vice versa, as well as attracts a more diverse next generation, including to the professoriate. In other words, I focus on the ways in which universities are public goods.

I also want to pause here for a moment and reflect on my use of the term diversity – often a controversial cover for not taking racial reparative justice seriously. I strongly believe in and indeed work on issues of reparative racial justice and racial equity – this is at the center of all the work we do as an anchor institution in my home city of Newark, NJ, as Taja-Nia [Henderson, Dean of the Graduate School at Rutgers-Newark] can describe in more detail off-line here at LINA. Nevertheless, as a social psychologist, I also believe firmly that diversity is a critical concept for building inclusive, innovative, and just civic-social infrastructure in our institutions, in our organizations, and in our neighborhoods. These are not mutually exclusive goals or campaigns, but rather intertwined in a well-functioning democracy.

My Perspective on Leadership – Insiders with Outsider Values

Now, I want to start with leadership, and specifically, with the openness of those with decision-making influence across an institution to cultural change, both in terms of norms and practices, but also aspirations. Here I make a distinction informed by the wisdom of one of my all-time heroes, Anita Hill, in her 2002 *New York Times* opinion piece, entitled: *Insider Women with Outsider Values*.² Now, she happened to be talking about two women, whistle-blowers in fact (one in the Minneapolis FBI and another at Enron), who weren't afraid to let their "outsider values" guide their efforts at institutional transformation, at some considerable risk to their insider power.

As obvious as this may sound, I believe that every day in our positions and institutions we are confronted with choices, small and large, that pit "getting ahead" against institutional transformation – or to say it another way, the pursuit of private gain or public good. And I point

¹ Remarks given at the American Council of Learned Societies Leadership Institute for a New Academy, July 12, 2023, at Sarah Lawrence College.

² Hill, Anita. (2002). Insider women with outsider values. *The New York Times*, June 6, 2002, A31.

to Anita Hill's framing because these choices often pivot on whether you are prepared to "check your identity at the door" to assimilate to insider norms and practices and aspirations, or whether your "outsider values" keep speaking to you.

Now, I don't want to suggest, as is true for all the choice points I'll describe today, that this model of outsider values informing insider decisions and actions is in any way easy. This is especially true as the academy is one of the most traditional spaces, where everything from rankings to promotions to simple pats on the back or even to the likelihood that when you speak in a meeting your contribution will be recognized, operates off of a model of assimilation not push back; status quo not change. Which brings me to the critical question of how to survive or even thrive as an insider with outsider values.

Here, as a social psychologist, I turn to the lessons of my field on the value of *critical mass*, as opposed to solo status. When you are one of a few, you will always be subject to stereotype threat, both from the pressure to represent and the likelihood that others see you through that (often deficit) lens. This is the choice point we all face at some point or another as to whether to be the "exceptional child," fitting in and representing our group at a mostly or even predominantly homogenous table of "others," or to choose instead to find and create and argue for a more fully reset table of diversity.

This is why, for example, I prefer hiring programs that engage clusters of new voices at once, both creating critical mass and reaping what Scott Page calls the diversity bonus of many, different perspectives innovatively intersecting, rather than the lone outsider brought in while the rest of the table remains the same.³ Not only will the work we do get better, as Page argues, but to the extent that a more expansive diversity allows us all to appreciate first hand as much within group variance as between group variance, then stereotypes begin to be dismantled as well.

Of course, valuing diversity (via critical mass) as much as we value homogeneity (via opportunity hoarding for those like us), as the late organizational theorist Kathrine Phillips brilliantly reminded us, is both not easy and definitely not the academy's norm, all liberal views to the side.⁴

Sorry, but I am constantly struck by how easily we come in the academy to assume that the same old tables are full of exceptional, albeit familiar, people. In this regard, I think back on a comment that Sheila Widnall, former Secretary of the Air Force and MIT engineering professor, once made. While she was praising the National Academy for its efforts to welcome more women in its ranks, she noted with some irony that she would be happy when there are as many mediocre women in the Academy as men. Hear, hear!

Nonetheless, as someone who has experienced both being the "exceptional child" at some of those tables (by virtue of solo status not by standardized scores!) and the utter joy and inspiration

³ Page, Scott. (2017). *The Diversity Bonus: How Great Teams Pay Off in the Knowledge Economy*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

⁴ Phillips, Katherine. 2017. What is the real value of diversity in organizations? Questioning our assumptions. In *The Diversity Bonus: How Great Teams Pay Off in the Knowledge Economy*, by Scott Page, 223-245. Princeton: Princeton University Press and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

of the amazingly diverse leadership team I now work with every day at Rutgers-Newark, it is certainly worth remembering that the more you surround yourself with insiders with outsider values, the more you will normalize the inclusive academy, not to mention increase your own daily mental health.

Of course, part of truly committing to an environment with a critical mass of diverse perspectives empowered at the table is that your perspective is only one of many. That is, part of embracing what Adrianna Kezar and Elizabeth Holcombe at the Pullias Center for Higher Education at USC call a “shared equity leadership model” is not only that you surround yourself as much as possible with a diverse group of change-agents across the institution, all committed to a basic vision of the institution as a public good, but that you understand that this may mean that your strategy or solution won’t always “win out.”⁵

My Perspective on Institutional Change – Outside-In Framework

It is my experience that the academy is a very insular place and that even when we commit, as the LINA has so forthrightly to creating leadership for a just future in higher education, we often start by examining what has to change within, rather than starting with an outside-in perspective as a guiding framework. Now, don’t get me wrong, we need to commit to internal transformation (again, as LINA is so ready to do), but I think it should involve some guiding principles based on what the public needs from us, from the outside-in. And what I find very interesting and reassuring about the outside-in perspective on institutional leadership is the value it can play in validating and building a base of support for institutional transformation of norms and practices within the academy.

I learned this lesson very clearly as Provost at the University of Michigan in defending affirmative action in the *Gratz* and *Grutter* cases that have just been overturned by the Supreme Court. In framing our case, we had a very clear body of social psychological literature and data from longitudinal studies at Michigan on the educational benefits of diversity on college campuses (the internal case) and we listened to the lawyers as to how to stay away from the external reparative justice approach that had been rejected by Powell in *Bakke* and continues to be today. Nonetheless, I would argue that what won the day in *Grutter* was actually the external, societal perspective articulated in the military and corporate briefs (the external case) that gave O’Connor the basis for an argument about the compelling interest of diverse opportunity for democratic legitimacy. In other words, even though the internal argument for race conscious admissions revolved around the very important educational benefits of diversity for all, the pivotal external compelling interest – that O’Connor labeled as the need for the paths to leadership in society to be visibly open to talented and qualified individuals of every race and ethnicity – really cemented the victory.⁶ (And ironically and sadly, Justice Roberts in reversing O’Connor’s precedent, actually made an exception for military academies in the use of race-conscious admissions, pointing to a national security rationale.)

⁵ Kezar, Adrianna, Elizabeth Holcombe, Darsella Vigil, and Jude Paul Matias Dizon. 2021. *Shared Equity Leadership: Making Equity Everyone's Work*. Washington, D.C. and Los Angeles: American Council on Education and University of Southern California Pullias Center for Higher Education.

⁶ *Grutter v. Bollinger*. 2003. 539 U.S. 02-241 Accessed June 15, 2022. <https://www.oyez.org/cases/2002/02-241>.

Now, fast forward (as this recent discouraging Supreme Court decision makes us do) – taking an outside-in perspective today, makes me go back to a full reparative justice argument because the “walls around opportunity,” as Gary Orfield has written about in his recent volume in our book series, have so solidified and the diversity explosion makes it ever more urgent that we engage the fastest-growing, but most sidelined talent pool out there.⁷ So, given the court decision, how do we realize this outside-in perspective? We take seriously what reparative justice looks like in an era of re-segregated and under-resourced public schools, and more fulsomely engage our communities to take down those walls around opportunity and build genuinely equitable pathways to higher education. In turn, I would argue that this external engagement will in turn lead to internal institutional transformation at the end of the day, as we recognize what Lani Guinier called the *Tyranny of the Meritocracy* – namely that our habits of narrowly assessing talent are missing out on a vast pool right in our own backyards.⁸

My Perspective on Realizing Outside-In Transformation

Having argued here for the importance of approaching institutional leadership and transformation with a perspective first on what the public needs from us, I want to step back a moment and say that to achieve this outside-in approach, it does require changing some of our internal habits right from the start. At a macro-level, we won't recapture the public trust unless we learn to listen to and be guided in part by that public perspective; and at a micro-level we will be better suited to have real social impact if we relinquish the “cult of the expert,” as Harry Boyte brilliantly frames our academic proclivity to pontificate,⁹ and adopt instead an approach of co-creation which my colleague, Peter Englot and I have labelled as a “community of experts with and without pedigree.”¹⁰ I learned this in Syracuse, from a wise community leader who said: “Ask us, we lay our heads down here at night.” Of course, we still need to pick and choose whom we listen to and what advice we take from the outside in (e.g., we don't need to ban books, but it helps to know the challenge out there).

We have seen first-hand the wisdom of relinquishing the cult of the expert in favor of a more fulsomely collaborative, public-driven approach to public scholarship and anchor institution work in Newark across a range of arenas from economic development and education to socially-engaged art and environmental justice to public safety and more. For example, our criminal justice scholars pioneered an approach to public safety that involves risk terrain modeling – focusing on the characteristics of the places where crime occurs (vacant lots, unlit bus stops, etc.) rather than the people doing it. But this approach has realized a huge impact of late precisely because they feed the data to a group of forty or so community partners on a regular basis who then create the interventions in collaboration with law enforcement (lowering car theft, for example, by a community campaign to get people to stop leaving cars idling in front of bodegas instead of the police giving tickets for car idling after the theft occurs). Moreover, the

⁷ Orfield, Gary. 2022. *The Walls Around Opportunity: The Failure of Colorblind Policy for Higher Education*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

⁸ Guinier, L. (2015). *The Tyranny of the Meritocracy: Democratizing Higher Education in America*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

⁹ Boyte, Harry. 2009. *Civic agency and the cult of the expert*. Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation.

¹⁰ Cantor, Nancy, and Peter Englot. 2013. “Beyond the ‘Ivory Tower’: Restoring the balance of private and public purposes of general education.” *The Journal of General Education* 62 (2-3): 120-128.

community partners now frequently define the nature of the data that our scholars then produce, as they best know the community – in other words, “they lay their heads down here at night.”

Once again, then, taking the outside-in approach of co-creating with community partners not only allows us to see the value and social impact of publicly-engaged scholarship (and reward it in tenure and promotion practices, for example), but it can also improve the very substance of our research. We certainly are seeing this in the work that our public humanists and social scientists are doing as part of Earl Lewis’ national project on university-community reparations solutions (Crafting Democratic Futures).¹¹ As our historians trace the legacy of slavery and red-lining in Newark, our community partners hold community dialogues on what reparations might look like today in Newark, and the flow of information back and forth greatly informs the likelihood of suggesting viable policies going forward.

Of course, and once again, digging deep in place-based collaborative work informed by an outside-in perspective on what is interesting to study and how to approach a contemporary challenge with an eye toward historical root causes, can fly against the grain of institutional and disciplinary practices, and leaders need to be cognizant of these risks for faculty and students engaged in this work and attempt to counter those effects. I saw this very clearly in the work that the national consortium, Imagining America (that we founded at Michigan and that came to Syracuse and is now at UC Davis) did in its tenure team initiative to reward collaborative, publicly-engaged scholarship.¹² I still see it now when faculties question why a historian’s work is published in papers rather than in a book, or public affairs scholars prioritize global versus local scholarship or when productivity is counted in terms of volume, when high impact publicly-engaged work takes time to be realized. Nonetheless, I also have seen real progress both in the various institutions that I have been at and in the momentum in disciplinary organizations, certainly when it comes to making the all important shift from seeing this public work as “service” to recognizing its value as a core part of academic excellence and institutional mission, and a large part of the progress, I believe, comes because of the external imprimatur that partners outside of our gates can give to high impact scholarship and curricula.

My Experience of Strategies for Moving from Outside Values to Inside Transformation

As we think about strategies for building more engaged, self-reflective, open institutions – institutions that reflect the diversity of our world, that eschew an assimilationist model that often sees those who enter our world as passively absorbing our excellence versus actively contributing to it and co-creating with us – it seems important to think of ways to truly embed this perspective and vision in people and programs and processes across the institution (versus thinking of it as top-down mandates).

In this regard, I look to our teams as an essential starting point, breaking down the siloes across academic and student affairs and business operations and external relations in the shared equity leadership model. I also look for ways to involve many change-agents across the institution, such as in strategic planning that involves many working groups, town halls, charrettes and many

¹¹ Crafting Democratic Futures. 2023. Accessed July 24, 2023. <https://lsa.umich.edu/social-solutions/history-and-slavery/craftingdemocraticfutures.html>.

¹² Imagining America. 2023. Accessed July 24, 2023. <https://imaginingamerica.org/>.

partners from the outside as well. And I take seriously the value of critical mass and the value of solidifying the asset-based, open, and collaborative vision of what the world can contribute to our excellence by embedding it explicitly in the curriculum and programs, in places and centers, and in people, in order to embed the vision in things that can't be quickly undone. Here are some examples from Newark:

- *Curriculum and programs* – The outside-in perspective most centrally teaches us that collective intelligence based on the diversity of the lived experience of students, faculty, and community partners enriches our curriculum and that we should stop asking “others” to “rise above” their lived experiences as they enter our gates. This requires us to take what I would call an asset-based approach to the knowledge that students, faculty, and partners authentically and inherently bring to our table. At Newark, for example, our humanities faculty created a Lives in Translation Program, based on the 48+ home languages spoken by our students, who then in turn serve as interns in our immigration law clinic and participated in the contact tracing program for the City of Newark during COVID.¹³ Similarly, our arts, culture and media faculty have teamed with local journalists to create the digital platform *Newest Americans*, engaging the stories of our Dreamers, including a Story Bus that travels the neighborhoods of Newark to collect the narratives of migration and immigration that constitute Newark's history and identity to this day.¹⁴
- *Places and Centers* – I am a big believer that we express our values and solidify their impact over time by not only the social/academic infrastructure that we build but also the civil infrastructure that we build to last. So at Newark, we not only seeded many research centers doing publicly-engaged scholarship and anchor collaboration (seeding centers like Center for Politics and Race in America, Center for Law, Inequality, and Metropolitan Equity, Local Supply Chain Resiliency Center), but we also literally built infrastructure to do this work in the community (such as our 50,000 square foot University-Community Arts Collaboratory, Express Newark, in downtown Newark) and on campus (such as the P3 Collaboratory for publicly-engaged scholarship, pedagogy, and professional development that Taja-Nia Henderson directs).¹⁵
- *People* – Perhaps the social psychologist in me always brings me back to the notion of a critical mass of diverse people working together as key to institutional change, especially as a way to counter backlash, solo status, and stereotype threat – numbers really do matter in changing institutional culture. For example., cluster hiring, especially across departments is key to changing the professoriate and we have been working on this in Newark, especially across arts and sciences (with a new Latinx cluster and a burgeoning STEM cluster). Moreover, creating collaboratives that draw people from across institutions and organizations, also can help in ensuring stability across transitions, as we hope occurs with our many anchor collaboratives in Newark.

¹³ Lives in Translation. 2023. Accessed July 24, 2023. <http://www.livesintranslation.com/>.

¹⁴ Newest Americans. 2023. Accessed July 24, 2023. <https://newestamericans.com/>.

¹⁵ Center for Law, Inequality and Metropolitan Equity. 2023. Access July 24, 2023. <https://www.clime.rutgers.edu/>; Express Newark. 2023. Accessed July 24, 2023. <https://www.expressnewark.org/>.

My Experience with Resistance – Things You Can't Change and Things You Might Be Able to Move

I want to end by drawing on advice my father gave me a long time ago that I have never learned to fully take heed of – that is choose your battles, don't die on every hill – or at least understand that some things are less amenable to change than others. And I draw also, again, on my social psychology background, even as I have never fully internalized the lessons of the fundamental attribution error – namely that as people we overestimate what impact we can have and vastly underestimate the power of context – in this case institutional history. In this regard, at the risk of sounding self-referent, I turn to my own history of institutional leadership and the fundamental role of context in shaping outcomes.

- *Context matters* – In 2001, having just left Michigan after shaping the affirmative action cases, I went to the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, with the understanding that they wanted to institutionalize a commitment to diversity. What I didn't understand was the power of the traditions of a place – its alumni, its community, its identity – in shaping how open to or resistant to change it would be. As you know, UIUC is a phenomenal institution, led now by a good friend of mine, Robert Jones, but at the time I went there its historical and continuing allegiance to a so-called Indian mascot, Chief Illiniwek, was so pervasive and so dug in that I simply couldn't do the kind of organizing around diversity and inclusion that I believed in and that many faculty and community partners wanted to see happen. And the power of context was brought home to me in both bold ways, when a local citizen paid \$10,000 a month for billboards all over town saying Return Cantor (in UM's maize and blue) and Retain the Chief (in Illinois' orange and blue) and in more subtle ways, when a faculty colleague of my husband took him quietly to the side one day and whispered to him, "tell her she is doing the right thing." Clearly it just wasn't the moment or context to be an "insider with outsider values." Or, to say it another way, the outside-in messages were telling me that this wasn't my place. Interestingly, while the Illinois experience for me was one of contextual resistance to diversity, and the Michigan one was the opposite, reality also changes, as right after Michigan won the *Grutter* case, the state passed Prop 2, and the context for working on diversity changed there too. So, context is both written in institutional history and equally shaped by contemporary politics. As such, I urge that we all learn to expect a non-linear path to change and come to stomach the long game – something that I am admittedly not great at.

I also want to end with another piece of the fundamental attribution error as it relates to our over-estimation of what we can do as individuals and the corollary that real change happens collectively, so our hyper-individualistic model of leadership needs to give way to the role of collaborative campaigns for systems change. As I noted earlier, Lani Guinier wrote about the *Tyranny of the Meritocracy* – and we see that in higher education all the time – in rankings wars, in the adherence to standardized testing, in our failure to see the value of the diverse roads that students and scholars travel, in the way we eschew an ecosystem of collaboration and keep on competing instead. Real change in the academy will take all hands on deck and an openness to the one step forward, twenty steps back reality of leadership.