



COMMUNITY COLLEGE VOICE PODCAST SEASON 5, EPISODE 4
The Language of Equity and Inclusion

Our guest in this episode is Kimberly Baker-Flowers, the University Diversity Officer at California State University – East Bay. We are talking about the language of equity and inclusion.

Tabitha Whissemore:

Welcome to the CC Voice podcast, the only podcast about the power of the nation's community colleges. I'm Tabitha Whissemore. I work at AACC and today I am so pleased to be joined by Dr. Kimberly Baker-Flowers. She is the university diversity officer at California State University East Bay. And prior to that, she was the chief diversity officer at Portland Community College. Thank you so much for being here, Kim.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

Thank you for having me.

Tabitha Whissemore:

Before we get too deep into our conversation, can you tell listeners what your job as a diversity officer entails?

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

Primarily, I'll speak to Cal State East Bay. We look at the culture and climate for inclusion. And here recently we've looked at aspirationally belonging as well, and try to create an environment where everyone's lived experience, everyone's authentic selves can be brought into the community, honored and valued and seen, which is very aspirational, but it's what we try to do through practice and through policy. So we look at how we behave, what structures are in place that may act as barriers to the success of those aspirations, and then try to disrupt them or reimagine them in ways that creates a more inclusive campus climate or environment.

Tabitha Whissemore:

And that's a really heavy lift right now, I suppose. Yeah.



Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

Yes, definitely. The layers of COVID and the personal and professional colliding where there's little to no boundaries at all anymore because you're at home and everything feels much more ... For many folks, it feels heavy and overwhelming and then layer on the socio-political on a top of that and really dramatic life-changing ways that have occurred since June of this year. We are speaking about things on campuses that we have never talked about before, which is good in a lot of aspects from my point of view and the work that I do and the living that I do, but it can also feel, again, big and heavy and overwhelming. So it's a mixed bag, so to speak.

Tabitha Whissemore:

You and I met in 2019 when you led a meeting at AACC's offices about evaluating campus climate with a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion. And one of the first things you presented was a list of diversity definitions. And that really with me, because I feel like there are behaviors that have always existed, but maybe they were never defined or there were never terms given to them. And so there are words on the list such as adultism, microinvalidations, protective factor. And I know that the list that you have has continued to grow and evolve. So there are a lot of terms that just a few years back we might not have ever known or used as language evolves. Can you tell me how you devised this growing list and the reasons people in higher education need to know these terms?

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

Yeah, so it's very much a list that is part of my practice as a diversity professional. So wherever I'm at and whatever position, it's developed through stakeholder community input. So at PCC, we developed a list that was pertinent and relevant to Portland, Oregon. When I got to Cal State East Bay, it's very much pertinent and relevant to who we are and how we'd like to give language to how we exist on campus. So for me, it's very much creating a shared understanding and shared language amongst the community so that when we say words like anti-racism and diversity and inclusion and belonging, we truly understand what we mean because everyone has different definitions. And unless you clarify, "Well, how are you defining that," you could be operating on completely different pathways.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:



So the definitions allows us to have a document where we have literal definitions. We can say, "Okay, I understand this. I get this." For me, it's personally a way, and when I don't know about something or I hear it for the first time, I characterize it as giving me language. It allows me to speak to something that I knew. Like before I knew about microaggressions, I didn't have that language to name what I was feeling. So once I got an understanding of what that meant and how it was defined, I was like, "Oh, that gives me language to now name when I'm feeling this way, or I'm experiencing this." I can say, "Oh, that was a microaggression." And that allows for a different level of dialogue to then occur, especially if I'm in a group of colleagues where we're in the same community and we all have the same set of definitions and we can talk through whether or not those definitions resonate. Do they make sense? Are there things that need to be added?

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

For example, just yesterday at a faculty meeting I was in, it was brought up we need to have language and education and awareness around caste and what that means for East Asian folks who are now on our campus. And let's talk through that and let's include that as part of our diversity definitions. So again, it's always new learning. None of these documents wherever I go are stagnant or just written in stone. They're very much fluid, very much dictated by who the community is. And again, giving language to how we want to create a definition and language for ourselves that's then shared across the community, if that makes sense.

Tabitha Whissemore:

Absolutely. And as an editor, I know that sometimes we hold on to language and find it very precious, and I think it's so important to acknowledge that language has always evolved and it will continue to evolve. Another thing that I really love about having a list of diversity definitions is that not only do you recognize behaviors in others, but you can recognize behaviors in yourself, maybe things that you didn't think you were doing or acting on and hopefully learning to correct those. Have you encountered that at all in educating people in higher education, whether it's staff or faculty?

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

Definitely. Especially when I'm doing professional development, for example, language around triggers and what is a trigger, what does that mean? Depending on how it's used, because the media also has co-opted a lot of social justice language and given it connotations that have



somehow become political in negative ways. So when we come into the higher education context and we're saying, "Okay, these are-

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Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

... a higher education context, and we're saying, "Okay, these are the words and the language that we're using, and we're defining them in this way," we have to create this kind of common, again, shared understanding of, "This is how we're describing it, this is how we're using it in this particular context," so the language around triggers. It allows folks to... When they're in an emotion or if they're having a thought, it allows them to then signal to folks, especially in dialogue spaces, "I'm feeling triggered right now." Then if we all know what that means, then we all know, "Okay, they're in a moment," and there are particular steps you do to redirect yourself when you're triggered in whatever way.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

That, I think, allows for better communication, but I've seen it in action once people learn what is a trigger, what is it a trigger, what should I do when I'm feeling triggered? There's all these steps that we can then talk about once we know the definition of what it is and how to deal with it, then it leads to better communication and understanding that is also part of the conversation and learning. This happens with students, it happens with faculty, it happens with staff in a lot of facilitations that I do, and professional developments.

Tabitha Whissemore:

Have you gotten any pushback at all when you're presenting definitions like this?

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

Where I have gotten some pushback is sometimes around gender expression and gender identity. When we use those definitions... and it's a jumping off point because that then allows me to talk through the use of pronouns and why they are valuable. In many places that I've worked, I have gotten pushback as to, "Why are you doing this," and, "Why is this important?" and, "We didn't do this when I was growing up." I found that a lot of it is generational, that I have



to... The diversity definitions allow me to then say, "It's a way of honoring folks. It's a way of acknowledging and seeing people and not misgendering someone."

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

By being just as part of your practice, naming your pronouns, you're then welcoming in everyone's use of the correct pronouns, if that makes sense, but those definitions give some foundational understanding as to why and what these things mean, and then I can use it to start talking through why it's important for an inclusive climate, inclusive culture for us to speak through our pronouns.

Tabitha Whissemore:

In the community college sector, I know there was a big pushback where the word kids, there was a lot of pushback on the word kids when maybe faculty refer to their students as kids. There are a lot of adult learners in the community college world. Just as you said, I think respect and honoring who the people are is so important. One of the phrases that I want to dig into is critical race theory. Can you talk about what that is and how colleges can integrate it into everyday practices?

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

That's a big topic. Critical race theory is a literal theory that is researched and came out of law. For some decades now, it's been brought into higher education. Daniel Solorzano out of UCLA is one of the more prolific researchers in higher education and the application of critical race theory. I use a lot of his research. But critical race theory is basically a way to examine policy and practice and ensure that you are prioritizing race as central to the ways in which you're going to work through or analyze the situation.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

Critical race theory, the way that we used it at PCC is we created a toolkit that allowed us to take the five tenets of critical race theory and create them into a litmus test of five. We called it Take 5. It was asking us to pause and apply the theory before we made any policy or practice kinds of decisions. What those five are is understanding the centrality and intersectionality of race and racism; challenging the dominant ideology, so it's asking institutions to think outside of what they would normally do and try to be non-dominant and non-hierarchical in their approach. It



also asks you to think about your commitment to social justice. It asks you to value experiential knowledge, so for those you are making decisions upon, bring those voices in. If you're making a decision that's going to impact students, it asks you to think, "Did you ask the students? Did you bring the student voice in to this?" Then it also encourages you to through the interdisciplinary perspective, so bringing other disciplines into the conversation.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

The critical race theory at PCC was actually written into our strategic plan. We used as that as a lever to create a culture change that allowed us to... I operated out of the theory of social justice, but we used... Well, I would always say I use critical race theory as our lens for analysis. When we actually created policy, we had gotten to the point at PCC where we had a subcommittee of the District Leaders of Diversity Council that the policy on policy committees would send all new policies to, and we would use the toolkit and run every single policy through Take 5 and then send it on for the cabinet to review and vote on, knowing that we had looked at every policy through the lens of critical race theory and that then guarantees this thoughtful and intentional approach to how we do business as an institution.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

It allows you to think through many different identities. We incorporate Kathy Obear's Identity Cards, which has 20 or more identities that she has in literal cards, and it makes you think through, "Okay, so how would it impact differently abled? How would it impact someone through race? How would it impact someone through social economic status?" and it just goes on and on, and it forces you to be more inclusive in your thinking and decision-making.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

From my perspective, critical race theory allows for greater inclusion, and it does not allow or permit the avoidance of race at all, which is something that is oftentimes intuitively something that most folks want to do because race is hard and race is uncomfortable, but critical race theory says, "No, we're going to centralize it, we're going to talk through it, and we're going to-

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Kimberly Baker-Flowers:



He says, "No, we're going to centralize it. We're going to talk through it, and we're going to talk through all the intersecting identities, and we're going to be as inclusive as possible."

Tabitha Whissemore:

I think that's so important. And I think maybe especially now, though it should've happened a long time ago, with the killing of George Floyd and the protests that happened this summer, there were a lot of colleges that had issued statements and are doing, thinking on this issue. But a lot of times colleges, they'll have meetings, they'll bring in a speaker, but creating sustained change is very difficult. Do you have any advice for creating sustained change?

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

I have thoughts that are specific to me. I know what I would love to see. And there are, again, best practices and research that have studied this for decades. The best practices are easy to find, and many of those speak to leadership from the top down.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

So I say to most of my bosses, "This will not work unless there's leadership from the top down. You have to model it, and you have to hold folks accountable to it." So you have to prioritize this. If you're going to talk about you're an anti-racist institution, how are you prioritizing this in leadership team meetings? How are you asking faculty and staff how they're employing anti-racism in their jobs or in their classrooms? Are you assessing for it? Are you leading through it? Are you actually asking your direct reports, "How are you doing these things? How are you incorporating them? And are you prioritizing them?"

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

So it should be more than just a speech once a year or when we have a tragedy socially that we create a campus-wide statement around. It is what we are doing in terms of actions, consistent, intentional action every single day and how we're speaking through it. And again, it shouldn't just be one speech, it should be every speech. Because it impacts, especially where I'm at right now, we are predominantly students of color on my campus, so it's impacting your community daily. So it has to be something that is you have to speak as well as do.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:



Yeah, for me, it's very much showing up, doing it, being consistent, and I cannot emphasize enough, holding folks accountable to doing it. Because a lot of institutions, yeah, they will do the lip service. And the reason why they're allowed to do the lip service is because there's no accountability. There's no one saying, "Okay, that's great that you said that. Okay, what are you doing?" And asking that at every team meeting, "Okay, what are you doing?" That's where you'll see real movement and real change, if there's accountability.

Tabitha Whissemore:

And I feel like you'll be able to see that also in data with these equity gaps we have particularly at two-year colleges with who's completing and who is not completing. And that gap is widening because of the pandemic as well. So, yes, I think that you'll see those in the numbers. You'll see your results in the numbers.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

Definitely.

Tabitha Whissemore:

When we met a year ago, and I can't believe it was only a year ago because 2019 feels like it was a decade ago, one of the focuses was on campus climate surveys, and that was something that you had done at Portland Community College. Is that something that community colleges should do? Is now a good time for that?

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

I don't know anymore with 2020. 2020 keeps shifting. No, seriously, I think no college can address their gaps or challenges unless they know where they're at, and the way to do so is through a climate survey. And I only do climate surveys that are quantitative and qualitative, so doing both and doing all stakeholders at the same time, so faculty, staff, and students. Yes, I think especially if a university or college has not done one before, you're not going to get a sense for what your students are feeling and how they're experiencing the culture and climate.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

Now, COVID has complicated a lot of that. At East Bay, we were supposed to be doing a climate survey that was getting kicked off in spring of 2020. And then, all of a sudden, it was like, okay,



shift, we're going online, and we were no longer able to do in-person focus groups. But we are moving forward with the quantitative part of it. That will give us a baseline. And we can do pre-COVID and during COVID questions that'll get us a sense of, okay, so when things were, I guess, the old normal, how did you experience the environment? And now that we're in COVID, how are you experiencing, how are you coping with what's going on?

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

I would also, in the COVID context, encourage colleges to do a COVID-centric kind of pulse check with their students just to best understand how are you coping? What does food insecurity look like, or is it impacting you? Houselessness, is it impacting you? Understanding, do you have the technology that you need? Emotionally and mentally, what's going on? Where can we try to best support you?

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

We've done several of those at East Bay, and we started in spring, we're currently doing another one in fall, and we had one mid-summer. And we've seen trends. When we first started, students were very, very concerned about asynchronous versus synchronous, food and finances and losing jobs were front of mind. By summer, it was more this kind of disengagement, we'll come in and out because we weren't in session.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

But fall, it's been more, "Okay, we're exhausted. We're stressed. We're reaching breaking point." Food is much more prevalent. Having space just to be a student is a struggle. Many of our students are expressing that... Because the majority of ours, as they were at PCC, are first gen, low-income students, and parents and family not necessarily understanding what it looks like for Kim to be a college student, what does that look like at home? And I'm not used to seeing that, so-

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Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

What does that look like at home? And I'm not used to seeing that. So if Kim's home, she can watch her other four brothers and sisters while I go to work. So how do I do that and try to pay



attention on Zoom, but my little sister's sitting right next to me on a lollipop and sticking me with it, so I've got a blank my screen. What do I do? And I don't want ... They're juggling all these things and they're expressing that to us, and we need to know that because we've got to figure out, and we've talked a lot to our faculty about compassion and giving grace. Speaking through how do we practice equitable online learning? What does all that look like? But yeah, I think surveys, both quantitative and qualitative, if you can get them via zoom, I know it's a struggle, but quantitative especially gives you at least a pathway to understand what those gaps and challenges are. Because as I said, just on our campus, they've changed over the course of the last seven, almost eight months.

Tabitha Whissemore:

I think that's a great proactive approach too, rather than waiting for students to come to you and find out what their struggles are. Because a lot of times they won't, they won't speak up. They'll just fade away. Well, I can't believe we've almost reached the end of this episode of CC Voice. Is there anything else that you think people in the community college sector or in higher ed need to know right now?

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

I don't know. What's front of mind for me right now is understanding that you are not alone. I know we talk a lot about care for students, ensuring that they are successful, but there's also care for staff and faculty. Many are, again, wearing thin. Many are balancing children in the home, trying to figure out daycare and the demands of their full-time job. Trying to figure out how to keep their students engaged when their students are saying, really no. Just honoring the labor and the real trauma that many of us are in around much of what's happening socio-politically. Understanding that we're in this heightened rhetoric time around an election that feels, again, big, overwhelming, and sometimes frustrating, and giving that space and compassion, I think, for our colleagues, ourselves. I'm personally sick of some people telling me about self care because that ship sailed for me in like July.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

So I'm trying to figure ways to find ways to sustain myself because this feels endless. So the only thing that I can say is, you are not alone. You have a community. And I think our only recourse, at least for me in my eye, is to reach out to those who I identify as my community, even if it's just vent space for us. I've got folks who can look at me, laugh and smile, and be frustrated together



and breathe a little bit. So my words are, you're not alone and I do honor the labor, the work, the time, the frustration that all of this is causing and appreciate all that everyone does.

Tabitha Whissemore:

Thank you so much. We always end this podcast by asking our guests a fun question, which is, if you weren't doing the job you have right now, what would you want to be doing?

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

I would want to be somewhere that ... Well, I'm a Disney fanatic, so I would want to be, and I don't even want to be working. I want to be [inaudible 00:28:16]. I want to be at Disney World with all the babies in my family, just playing. And throwing birthday parties for them to see smiles and giggles. That would make me so happy.

Tabitha Whissemore:

Oh, that would be fantastic. Someday. Someday that will happen. Well, thank you so much, Dr. Kimberly Baker-Flowers. I really appreciate you taking the time out of your busy schedule to speak with us today on this very important topic. Thank you.

Kimberly Baker-Flowers:

Thank you.

Tina Henry-Barrus:

CC Voice is the official podcast of the American Association of Community Colleges. The show is produced by me, Tina Henry-Barrus. Tell us what you think, or if you have a topic that you'd like to hear us talk about on the show, send us an email to podcast@aacc.nche.edu. You can also follow us on Twitter at [comm_college](https://twitter.com/comm_college).

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