

## Democracy's College

### Episode 2: Reframing Racial Equity

Welcome to the Democracy's College podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at [ocrl.illinois.edu](http://ocrl.illinois.edu).

In this episode, Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher from OCCRL will talk with Dr. Dian Squire, a Visiting Assistant Professor at Iowa State University, about reframing racial justice.

**Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:** Welcome Dr. Squire.

**Dr. Dian Squire:** Good morning thank you for having me.

**Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:** Good morning. We wanted to talk with you about your research. In particular through your research you advocate for diversity, equity, and justice in higher education. Can you describe what diversity, equity, and justice mean to you, as well as share with us the importance of achieving each?

**Dr. Dian Squire:** I like to have actually pretty specific definitions of diversity, equity, and justice that I utilize that help to bracket my work, and I think these might be helpful for other folks in thinking about the work that they do. Diversity to me is a lexical tool, and it characterizes the structural representation of multiple marginalized societal groups: those who are not white, male, European in ancestry, able bodied, native born, English language speaking, binary gender identifying, Christian, and heterosexual. And that is also within a given institutional context and geographical context, so there is a lot of bracketing that is going on there. Equity to me refers to thinking about institutional policies, programs, and practices that are free from discrimination, bias, and inequalities, as well as democratic decisions that create opportunity and remove social oppression, based on past imbalances and prior and present negating circumstances. I think we also have to take some asset-based approaches to highlight positive and important centralizing experiences of all of our community members. For me, justice is deliberate and democratic equitable action, both done collectively and also individually, that moves us towards education as a public good. I kind of envision those three things, diversity, equity, and justice, as acting in a three-way relationship where diversity can exist independently, but really if we are going to formulate rich environments we also need to be thinking about equity and justice as playing a role in that. When they are understood separate from each other it is much harder for us to create critical masses of diverse bodies, create strong communities, and decrease marginalization for underrepresented groups. Better to have a mutualistic symbiosis between diversity, equity, and justice. I think it is important because we have a history of oppression starting with the colonization of our lands, forced slavery of African people in our country, and a country that was built on and continues to be fueled by the bodies of people of color. And there isn't really a doubt about this fact, despite what people may think or might not know. We really have to rectify our past; we have to do better in realizing the marginalizations that continue today and treat people as humans.

**Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:** Thanks Dr. Squire. With the way in which you describe diversity, equity, and justice, how do you see that playing out a little differently based on educational tier? Here at OCCRL, we are about looking at how diverse youth and adults transition into, though, and out of community

colleges in particular, but as you think about K-12, as well as postsecondary, are there ways in which we should advocate for diversity, equity, and justice similarly or in ways that are different based on that tier of education and learner?

**Dr. Dian Squire:** Yeah, I think it is a little bit different because when we think of higher education institutions there are much fewer, so the geographical context will maybe be a little bit more nuanced within a given district. I think who and where K-12 schools will draw students from will be different. So the work of equity and justice will also be different within these contexts, as far as the types of work that you might do with students and how we think about how diverse groups interact with each other. I do think that the work of thinking about diversity and equity and justice should be similar, because we live in a country where we will all interact with each other at some point, as we move out of those K-12 systems, but I think the implementation of programming and policies would look more nuanced on a K-12 level. However, it is somewhat cyclical in a way, in that universities are training administrators, training teachers to go out into these fields. So while some of the work might be implemented differently, on a K-12 level, we still need to do our work at a higher education level to ensure that those folks are doing really good learning when they are with us in the college classroom, so that when they go out into the K-12 setting that they can do just as good work with the students who are out there. I think the work of diversity, equity, and justice I look at from an institutional level, but there is also a policy level as well that can be addressed. While I don't do that specifically, there is obviously a lot of thinking around funding and districting and privatization of schools that all has impact on student learning and development in K-12, and the ability for us to create equitable opportunity is in those systems that need to be addressed as well.

**Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:** One of the things that we have been bearing witness to particularly over the days and weeks post-election is heightened tensions. It appears that there is an era that has heightened racial tensions as of late. What do you see as the role of colleges and universities in creating learning environments that support racially diverse collegians?

**Dr. Dian Squire:** I think universities have a unique opportunity to intentionally and purposefully engage people across differences. I mean we know cross-cultural engagement leads to many positive outcomes for a pluralistic society. I think in some ways we have kind of rested on our laurels of having 30% of students of color on our campuses and expecting that the work of equity and justice is done. We know that diversity is not enough and the role has to be multifold. I think that there are a couple of ways that colleges can create learning environments that support racially diverse collegians at the intersections of their identities. We can admit, hire, and retain students, faculty, and staff of color and think of those people across the intersections of their identities, including gender, sex, ability, immigration status, among many other things, and not task faculty of color for the sake of having faculty of color, anybody for the sake of having that diversity, but because they are the best people at engaging student learning, engaging communities, and are people who have meaningful work that reshapes society positively. Then we have to reward people for doing that work. Another thing that universities can do is find ways to train faculty and other instructors to integrate more diverse curriculums and pedagogies that reflect students in their classrooms and even those who are not in their classrooms. Once again geography plays a part in it, and sometimes we don't have certain groups of students in our classrooms, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't be talking about them and how we might support them. We can also ensure that we are being proactive in understanding major issues of our day and doing something about them instead of being reactive, as we often are. For instance, why do we have to wait for the president

to threaten to deport our students before we are willing to say that we care and protect them? Because we know that the threat of deportation has always been eminent. I think we also have to return to and engage university status, where we can't really continue to stand on the sidelines anymore when major national issues are occurring in our backyards. We used to have presidents who were really strong and made big statements, and their statements had impact, and I think once again our social justice focus needs to be directed outward, and then administration needs to work and support people who are doing that work on the college campuses. Hire people who are doing that good work and support students who want to study. Also engage with community members who are doing some of that work as well. Become a little bit more community oriented and support folks who are doing good social justice work that can be focused outward as well. I guess there are a couple other things that I think universities can do to support racial diverse students. Create opportunities for people to engage across differences in more meaningful ways and not be afraid to stand up for our values. Don't be pressured by neo-liberal pressures. We can just have diversity in our mission statements, because it brings students in, and I talked a little about this right. We have to live our mission, our vision, our values in every way possible. If we are being really radical, and I sort of brought this up in my talk a little bit, we could deconstruct all of our universities and start from scratch with everybody being at the table to try to create the most equitable university as possible. That is probably not going to happen in our time, but those are some of the things that come to my mind immediately when I think about supporting diverse racial collegians.

**Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:** Do you see this play out differently with minority-serving institutions, say historically-black universities and colleges (HBCUs) as opposed to predominately white institutions? Are the roles different you think?

**Dr. Dian Squire:** One thing that really been interesting and exciting is that at HBCUs in particular we are seeing a growth in enrollment and it is not just enrollment of Black students. It is enrollment of students across a large group of racial categories. I wouldn't be surprised if this growth continues over time. HBCUs are extremely successful at cultivating environments that are broadly inclusive across race, at stimulating core understanding of Blackness in America, at graduating large numbers of PhDs, and at cultivating grand thinkers and creative thought leaders, and I think that their subsistence is of the utmost importance for our country. But there is still work to be done on these campuses. There are still continuing concerns around relationships between international African students and more prevalence in the news about inclusivity of LGBT and trans communities on those campuses. We see lots of pieces coming out about that more recently. While there is positive movement in HBCUs, and I think a lot to learn from them, many of these universities are also deeply embedded with values that can be oppressive to certain groups that we don't often think about. Some of that comes out of religious values, so there are intentions that need to be teased out and discussed. For those of us who do not do work directly with HBCUs, or fulltime at HBCUs, I think our work is to better understand the value of HBCUs and to recognize the importance of these institutions in society and also to support them socially and financially in any way that we can. If we look at the movement for Black Lives that has called for tuition-free education or removal of debt and a full funding of HBCUs as part of their platform, I would support these demands and work within my scope of influence for that message and try to get those policies passed. We can look to great scholars in the field, especially some new scholars that do work on HBCUs. Some new folks that come to mind are Dr. Steven Mobley, Jr. at the University of Alabama and [Dr. Felecia Commodore](#) at Old Dominion who are doing some good work as well that we can look toward.

**Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:** As you talk about student movements, in particular Black Lives Matter, what is the role of faculty, staff, and administrators in response to student activism in responding to racial inequities?

**Dr. Dian Squire:** I think the roles that faculty, staff, and students play are different, though I think mainly students would think that there should be a homogeneity of activism, and this is kind of the back end of my talk. I want to give a shout out to [Dr. Veronica Jones](#) at University of Texas San Antonio and the students that we have both worked with across our time for kind of thinking through some of this stuff. I think that the restrictions that racism and white supremacy place on people in the academy do so differently, so therefore there is a heterogeneity of activism that we have to take into consideration. I think that a traditional ask on faculty and staff of color to engage in activist work can be an ask that is both based in classism and ableism and potentially devoid of analysis of racism fully. I also mention some other constrictions as well, such as positionality, alignment of concerns or philosophy on race and racism, some inter-racial consciousness of faculty and staff. So ultimately I think faculty and staff and students need to talk to each other more and also extend a little grace. We need to bring each other along in the process. We need to educate each other on what our goals and missions and abilities and opportunities are. That being said, students do have power to still engage administrators, to disrupt the normal order of things, and we have seen students bring to national prominence campus concerns and make really important changes on their campuses. Activism is positive and we have seen it be a positive tool on college campuses. We need to nuance it more and think about the different types of people and how they engage. I think faculty and staff can help students navigate hierarchies and bureaucracy, which are often used to help quell dissent. I also think one other thing we need to think about is that it is a misnomer to assume that action activism is present on all campuses at the level we see on TV and in the news, and I don't find this to be the case at some of the universities that I have been at. Sometimes the role of faculty and staff might be to help prepare students to engage in some of that work, to teach them how to organize or bring to light their teaching, meeting, and issues present in their university, and to do some of that conscious raising as well. I don't think that activist bug is there all of the time.

**Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:** So what do you consider the costs to those that are activists? Is there a cost to those who are perceived as activists?

**Dr. Dian Squire:** I think that there is obviously potential for material costs and loss, such as around employment and access to opportunities, that I think that those are always pieces that need to be waived. There are a lot of emotional costs, and that is what I have been talking to my students a lot about this semester, particularly towards the end of the semester. What are these emotional costs and how are they feeling when they are trying to survive in institutions, and then as they do in certain ways engage in activism or are restricted from engaging in activism? Particularly for me, I teach graduate students and master's students, some who come from strong activist backgrounds in their undergraduate but are now in graduate assistantships as part of the university and they are not able to engage in the same types of movements in the same ways as they were before. So they talk a lot about being exhausted and frustrated and angry and demoralized and hopeless. I think the range of emotions is vast and it is tiring. I think that we have to think about how we might engage in shifting some of those emotions into actionable outcomes. Sometimes we need faculty and staff to do some of that work; we need counselors and therapists, and students need other students to do that work. Sometimes these emotions are directed at outsiders who are holding students and faculty and staff back, but sometimes it is also directed rightly or wrongly at people who are in coalition with them. People who are "insiders."

I think it is important to discuss emotions and be authentic and open and to not engage in inner turmoil that will disrupt the movement, whatever that movement may be. I think also, I talk about this, but there are some negative costs in thinking of activism as negative and having a negative connotation, in that it is assumed to be facing outward or should only be facing outward from the university where engagement is seen as positive and also facing outward. So we have to change the way we conceptualize engagement and activism, because I think we can see that students who are marginalized or in coalition in marginalized groups who engage in activism often face inwards at the university and that is seen negatively, and therefore there are repercussions for these people. Whereas people who are more privileged and have opportunities to travel abroad and do voluntourism and things like that is seen as positive engagement. They might get different benefits or been seen in different ways; there is some sort of changing of the dynamic and how we conceptualize engagement and activism that needs to happen as well.

**Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:** So before we close, if you were to give a call to action, what would you like to issue for those listening today who would want to take a more active role in advocating for racial justice?

**Dr. Dian Squire:** The first thing I would say is to learn more about the history of this country, and I think that is one piece that we often leave out, and that is something that takes a lot of time and energy. But if we aren't willing to learn about our colonial, racist, and white supremacist past and present, then I think we are really limited in the ways that we can help change the country. I think we will continue to implement very liberal policy changes that don't really change anything at the core. I think we also need to think through intersectional lenses about race and gender and international status and ability and others that we can think of. When we think of academia, so for faculty and graduate students who are listening, or other students, that work is not always located in our academic journals. In some fields it is, but I think we should also look outside of our journals and read blogs, like those on the Black Lives Matter website or the Brown Boi Project website and other sorts of intersectional organizations, local organizations, and movement blogs that folks might be familiar with. The amount we can learn from those is vast, because the information is out there and it also relieves some of the communities from doing this educational work over and over again. We can read what has already been written out there. I think we need to listen to other stories and believe them. Provide opportunities for people to share their experiences. And then, don't talk. Let's listen, let's go to speaker series, let's go to something I never thought I would care about or attend normally, and just learn and not have to say something all the time. We need to use our privileges when we can, whenever we can, and I don't think we have time to be silent any more. I think in particular as faculty member, I think about how we nuance out activism into the various loci of control that we have. As faculty, I am always thinking about how do I balance an activist identity with an identity that is in a lot of ways controlled by a bureaucracy and a hierarchy and various levels of power and tenure and all these things. I have to figure out how I nuance it the best and what am I willing to give up or not. I think we do need to leverage as much power as we can and take some of those risks and step out of our comfort zone to create some changes. Otherwise nothing is going to change if we keep waiting for six years, and six years, and six years, and down the line. Obviously think systemically about issues; that means don't only think about race but think about racism. We know that race and our understanding of race changes across time. Don't think only about gender; think about genderism. If you are not sure about that what that means—Google it. I Google things, faculty Google things, and there is nothing wrong with it. We need to be all able to talk about

these topics together. Engage in our communities; do not think that universities are the preeminent spaces of thinking. Our communities and folks who engage in these struggles every day that maybe some of us do, but some of us don't because of the privileges we have to have to have full-time, working-class jobs in ivory towers, and we don't always see everything that is going on. With that when I think about community, not just within a space of learning and change, but being kind. Say hi to people. Talk to each other. Extend grace. Create opportunities. Share resources. Think in expansive coalitions. I think that the last thing that I would suggest for people who want to advocate for racial justice, particularly people who are not as literate in thinking about racial justice or are unsure how to engage currently, is to ask really good questions. When we don't feel empowered to make statements or to utilize our capital for whatever reason and we see something that is amiss, I always tell our students and folks that I know to ask a really good question. As simple as, why do we do that? Or, why is that the way it is? Or, have we ever thought about "x"? I think it really forces other people to do the work and it prompts reflection and hopefully change, particularly as a minoritized person who asks a good questions it takes off a little of the stress and the emotional costs of activism. Because it forces somebody else to do the work while you are still able to get your point across or your thinking across at least. I'd say those are some of the starting points for racial justice, and I am sure that there are many other calls that we can make for action, but I think that those are hopefully a couple starting points for action.

**Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:** Yes, I think those are wonderful starting points, thank you for giving us so much food for thought. Today we have been discussing how to reframe racial justice with Dr. Dian Squire.

For more information about racial equity and justice in educational settings, we recommend that you visit Dr. Dian Squire's website at Iowa State University for a list of publications. For more podcasts, links to today's recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit [occrillinois.edu/democracy](http://occrillinois.edu/democracy) or send them via Twitter @occrill. Tune in next month when Angel Luis Velez from OCCRL will talk with Dr. Michelle Espino from the University of Maryland on understanding Latina / Latino educational pathways. Background music for this podcast is provided by DubLab. Thank you for listening and for your contribution to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.