

DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, EQUITY

DEI* has become common parlance in the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors, thanks in part to the groundbreaking work of groups such as the D5 coalition, CHANGE Philanthropy and the identity-focused affinity groups that compose it, Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity (PRE), as well as other sector infrastructure groups that have integrated DEI into their core philosophies including Grantmakers for Effective Organizations and National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. The terminology is backed up by some very good work and progress. Yet, like any change effort, there also can be the tendency to use the terminology without a clear or shared understanding of meaning.

This particular case is further complicated by the tendency to lump together three terms – *diversity*, *equity*, *inclusion* – as if they are interchangeable or parts of a cohesive whole. While they do operate in relationship to each other, they are distinct concepts that raise different questions and possibilities and drive different bodies of work; they can support each other, but at times they can be in tension.

For these reasons, it can be helpful to begin with some grounding definitions, recognizing that these will evolve over time as a group gains shared understanding and experience integrating them and as the DEI field itself continues to evolve. The following definitions reflect our thoughts as well as synthesis of current thinking in the field.

<i>Term/Lens</i>	<i>This lens tends to focus attention on...</i>	<i>Operating with this lens tends to drive toward certain kinds of change...</i>
DIVERSITY	<p>Composition</p> <p>The mix of attributes of a group; some differences matter more than others</p> <p><i>Guiding Question: Who is <u>present</u>?</i></p>	<p>Representation</p> <p>Ensuring that population demographics are appropriately reflected in participation, leadership, decision making, etc.</p>
INCLUSION	<p>Relationships & Experience</p> <p>What happens with the diversity of a group, how differences are tapped and integrated</p> <p><i>Guiding Question: Who is <u>participating</u>?</i></p>	<p>Engagement</p> <p>Considering ways to make diverse participants feel welcome and able to contribute</p>
EQUITY	<p>Outcomes & Root Structures</p> <p>How power relationships and systems shape life outcomes for group members, with a particular concern for patterns of disparity and disproportionality</p> <p><i>Guiding Question: How is <u>power</u> operating?</i></p>	<p>Ownership</p> <p>Shifting systems and conditions so those who have been excluded or oppressed benefit and become empowered agents of the change they seek</p>



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A key takeaway about the definitions offered above is to highlight that nuanced distinctions exist, and that being more precise and explicit with terminology could help reduce false assumptions and misunderstanding and catalyze deeper analysis. It is also to emphasize the essential importance of an Equity lens. Tucked in the middle of “DEI,” Equity can be overlooked. Actually, a robust and explicit Equity lens is critical to drive toward effective, just, and sustainable solutions to our most vexing and important challenges, including those related to representation and engagement.

While the acronym DEI is preferable to DIE, the sequencing above suggests a more logical progression in terms of degree of complexity and impact. This should not be confused with a linear road map for doing this work – while engaging diverse perspectives can catalyze putting *Equity* on the table, it is also possible to enter with an *Equity* lens, which then can help inform and address *Diversity* and *Inclusion* dilemmas in more durable ways.

Note that all of the desired changes can be positive. *Representation* is a bedrock of democracy, and *Engagement* is essential for it to thrive. Both are necessary for the possibility of true *Ownership* to be realized (rather than just theorized). And yet, *Diversity* and *Inclusion* alone are not sufficient for that to happen; confronting and proactively shifting power relationships and structures are a critical distinction of *Equity*. In turn, the *Equity* lens can make *Diversity* and *Inclusion* efforts more authentic and successful. Without an explicit power analysis and attention to structures, *Diversity* efforts can become tokenizing; *Inclusion* can become cultural appropriation.

Consider these additional tensions:

- A *Diversity* lens that enforces *Representation* could result in penalizing a group composed entirely of a marginalized population; groups like this often form in response to being excluded or not well served by mainstream groups, but then

can be accused of being exclusive themselves because they are not diverse and representative of the larger community in which they operate.

- Schools and other institutions that serve diverse populations often place a high value on *Inclusion* and *Engagement*, and can be challenged when “free speech” of dominant groups becomes “hate speech” that threatens the freedom, dignity, and lives of structurally marginalized groups.
- There are countless examples of *Diversity/Representation* efforts that have no effect on closing disparities (because they are not designed to do so), and end up reinforcing stereotypes and assumptions about what change is possible.
- An *Equity* lens can feel, and in fact sometimes become, an intellectual exercise that overlooks individual nuances and contributions, or that inadequately tends to the emotional aspects of a change effort; without an inclusive vision and architecture for equity, there can be a tendency to “flip” power dynamics rather than transform them.

Again, resist the temptation to default to the overly generic DEI; instead, say what you mean and mean what you say with respect to which lens is being engaged and toward what purpose. And, while keeping in mind that *Diversity*, *Inclusion*, and *Equity* each bring value, an explicit *Equity* lens can make the difference between transactional change and true transformation.

*Note: Some have begun using the term *IDEA* (a more desirable acronym, for sure) to include a fourth concept – *Access*. This seems to land somewhere between the definitions of *inclusion* and *equity* above, acknowledging the influence of structures but not necessarily power.



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