Perspectives on Inclusion and Cognitive Bias

Pédagogie collégiale presents a series of articles that examine the challenges of inclusion in college and the means to support a more inclusive teaching practice. An in-depth dialogue between two educators first situates college education within the broader social movement of equity, diversity, and inclusion. Then, the reflections of three college student coresearchers on the importance of interpreting cognitive biases provide a direct invitation to take a fresh look at inclusion.

Why Still Talk about Inclusion?

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Emilie Doutreloux began her career as a social worker involved with refugees in community organizations and at the Cégep de Sherbrooke. Inspired by these seminal encounters, her doctoral research deals with the obstacles experienced by allophone people of recent immigrant background in college education. She was also a manager at the Centre d'apprentissage interculturel before returning to her first love by joining the pedagogical team at the Cégep de l'Outaouais more than 10 years ago. She was recently awarded a major research grant from the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC) to strengthen her institution's capacity in equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI).

Equity, diversity and inclusion are becoming overused concepts in education. We insert them into our daily expressions or strategic plans without checking their scope. I chose to speak with Emilie to better understand their implication and relevance in education.

Catherine Bélec — The gaze of our society is increasingly focused on topics such as systemic racism, inclusion, multiculturalism, and other delicate subjects... As an individual, I am sensitive to all this "fomenting" of social development. It challenges me, it encourages me, too, to see this willingness to act and to make the world more just... a bit like a social awakening. Emilie, as someone who knows the subject well, how do you see the current situation? What do you think is at the origin of all these social reflections? Is it fair to say that we are finally reaching a point where we can see the problems that have existed for a long time?

Emilie Doutreloux — I think we are at a point in time that many people have been awaiting for decades. Experiences of racism, discrimination and lack of diversity leading to injustices that persist over time have been highlighted for ages by marginalized groups and their allies. We need only think of the movements for the recognition of the rights of Indigenous peoples, Black people or women. Basically, what is being challenged in these struggles are the homogeneous ways of operating and thinking reflected by the dominant majority: a phenomenon that leads to the creation of a normative system that quickly becomes oppressive for those who do not fit into the defined framework. This is nothing new. What is new, however, is that a critical mass seems to have been reached, allowing for an increase in the recognition of this problem. It is this recognition that is new. It is as if all the experiences inherited or lived by individuals or groups of individuals who often feel excluded from decision-making have finally been heard and recognized in the public discourse, as if their perspectives, their interests and their voice finally exist and find value in the current context. From this point of view, all the topics you mention do not come from a problem—on the contrary—but rather, in my opinion, from the fact that we are living a historical moment.

CB — Yes, that's also a bit the impression I have... It gives us hope! But at the same time, I must admit, as a teacher who objectively considers herself to be part of the "dominant majority," that the situation is at the same time quite uncomfortable. I tell myself that it's okay—for once, it would only be fair that the dominant majority be inconvenienced! Then again, I want to contribute to all this, but I always wonder if I might say or do something awkward; I wonder about my unconscious biases, about my role, as a college teacher, in this social movement. How do you see college education fitting into this?

ED — The college network is basically a micro-society that echoes society in general: it is well documented that the injustices present in society are found on the school benches, even in higher education. This micro-society is embodied by the people who evolve within it: staff and student community members. On the other hand, there is also a growing recognition of the responsibility of colleges to develop frameworks to identify and eradicate some of the unacceptable practices that have come to light in recent years. There is less fear of talking about oppression and subjects that used to be taboo. The recent requirement for CEGEPs to develop policies to prevent and address sexual violence is an indicator of this. It is anticipated that future policies will focus on diversity, equity and inclusion.

CB — I understand that it is important to consider the injustices that minority groups experience if eventually, we want to move towards a fairer society. But how do you implement that in education? When I try to talk to different people about this, I'm always a little wary: some are on the same page as I am, but others are more hesitant. Some are even a little skeptical: "In college, students already have the same rights... they are all taught and evaluated in the same way." According to these people,

college is already an inclusive model. What would you say to someone who told you that?

ED — To answer this question, I think we need to start by defining what we mean by *inclusion*. The way the question is framed—"aren't we already applying an inclusive model"—implies that the quality of inclusion can be judged by what is put in place to ensure it. I would say that's a slippery slope. It's like saying that the quality of inclusion in a setting can be judged by what causes it or what prevents it, when the quality of inclusion should be based on the outcome of those measures. And the outcome is really a feeling; it's about making anyone feel like they can be authentic, that they are accepted with all their identities. It's about creating a climate that allows everyone to feel comfortable expressing their ideas and points of view, in the cafeteria as much as in the classroom. This sense of comfort will make individuals feel respected, fulfilled, connected and safe. This is a goal that we pursue for our students, with regard to their emancipation and social well-being as well as their education.

At the same time, I think we need to ask ourselves who are the best judges of this inclusion. Are those with authority in a system really in a position to judge the sense of inclusion experienced by others? When you think about it, I think it is logical to recognize that they themselves are the best judges of the degree of inclusion in a community. At the Cégep de l'Outaouais, we conducted a survey in 2021 to get an idea of the student experience regarding EDI. The overall picture shows that about 70% of the student population feels a sense of inclusion. But when we refine the data—and since inclusion issues are about minorities, it is imperative that we do so—we find that there are several groups that do not, in some circumstances, feel this sense of inclusion. For example, Indigenous persons feel that school materials

or course content do not value or take into account their reality; individuals from the LGBTQ2+ community do not feel welcomed or respected in their environment, or even discriminated against; visible and religious minorities and non-binary people feel that they do not have the same opportunities as others to succeed in their internships; people with disabilities feel that their strengths are not valued; and so on. So, is the college community sensitive to the issue of diversity and increasingly trying to consider minority groups? Yes, of course. Are we succeeding in making minority groups feel included, which would allow us to say that we are in an inclusive system? The answer is no.

CB — At the same time, you could say that college has never been inclusive. Higher education traditionally wasn't for everyone. We can see this in the data from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD): higher education is increasingly attractive, with a 9% jump in college graduates on average for OECD countries between 2008 and 2018. But what about the qualitative and human aspects? Will this progress be sustainable if the higher education model remains the same?

ED — The college model was built on the principles of democratization of higher education and equality of opportunity. The founding work of the Royal Commission on Education in the Province of Quebec (Parent Commission) speaks volumes in this regard. Thanks to this inclusive model, many people who were once excluded from higher education, for example, women, francophones and the impoverished, are now graduating from college. Despite this, not all is well. In the collective work *L'envers du décor: Massification de l'enseignement supérieur et justice sociale*, published in 2017, the researchers argue that inequalities in access to school, formerly present as early as the end

of elementary school, now play out at the level of higher education, despite everything that has been put in place in our educational institutions.

CB — I think it's understandable that inclusion is still a challenge in the field. It shakes up a lot of things and forces us to question many commonplaces as well as our traditional views.

ED — Yes, it is. For that matter, the data collected on the student college experience is one thing… but what about those who tried to get into college but didn't make it? I had the opportunity to study this issue during my doctorate. I found that it was easier for a recent immigrant to get into a university or vocational training program than a college program. Language placement tests, credential recognition and lack of clarity in admission processes are real barriers for these individuals. In their work, Potvin and Leclercq point out that this will often force these individuals to resort to adult education, i.e., short vocational training, thus distancing them from the paths offered in college studies.[1] When you add these considerations to the perceptions of the student population that I mentioned earlier, I think it's safe to say that the college network still has a way to go. That being said, I think there is a growing trend in this direction.

CB — It's true that in discourse, we see a great openness to diversity… but when we push the discussion further, I sometimes have the impression that not everyone really has the same vision of inclusion. Am I wrong in saying that there are in fact different postures that can be adopted with regard to the inclusion of diversity?

ED — To answer that, I think we need to first define, much like inclusion, what we mean by diversity. Diversity refers to all of the variations that can exist within populations, particularly in terms of age, culture, race, education, disability, gender, and immigration status.[2] In order to move toward inclusion, the end point, we must of course be aware of the diversity that exists. This is an essential first step. Secondly, it is important to know that inclusion is made up of several dimensions. And, indeed, an individual may adhere more to some of these dimensions than to others—which may give the impression that not everyone has the same stance on inclusion, even if they consider themselves inclusive. To clarify matters, it may be relevant to mention that the different dimensions of inclusion derive from different models, which all imply

specific approaches to diversity. Among these, we find the intercultural, multicultural and anti-racist models. It may therefore be necessary to ask ourselves, as individuals, the following question: Do my views orient me toward a particular dimension of inclusion? What model do my actions and gestures resemble? And, above all, which model would I like to strive toward?

According to Magnan and her team, interculturality aims for the contribution of differences to a project that they describe as a broader collective, that of a majority group.[3] Inclusion has retained from this model a willingness to work toward a common project. On the other hand, it moves away from interculturality by rejecting the idea that this project belongs to a majority group; in this respect, it is more in line with the multicultural model of Kymlicka and Savidan,[4] who point out that this model is characterized by its recognition of the multiplicity of identity affiliations: founding nations, Indigenous nations or nations formed by immigration. It is essentially about promoting and valuing identity differences and group equality. Inclusion has retained from this model the perception that what is common does not belong to the majority, but to the community in all its diversity—a bit like a quilt that makes it possible to form a harmonious whole. The anti-racist model, on the other hand, proposes transformative pedagogical approaches that focus on the empowerment of oppressed or minority groups. It aims to deconstruct the effects of systemic discrimination on specific groups. The

[1] See POTVIN, M. and J.-B. LECLERCQ. "Facteurs affectant la trajectoire scolaire des jeunes de 16-24 ans issus de l'immigration en formation générale des adultes," *Revue des sciences de l'éducation*, vol. 40, n° 2, p. 309-349.

[2] According to the GOVERNMENT OF CANADA. *Women and Gender Equality Canada* (WGE) *Corporate Plan*, 2020-2021.

[3] Emilie Doutreloux refers here to MAGNAN, M.-O. et al. "Le leadership "inclusif" en contexte pluriethnique montréalais," in F. KANOUTÉ and J. CHARRETTE (eds.). *La diversité ethnoculturelle dans le contexte scolaire québécois : pratiquer le vivre-ensemble*, Montréal, Canada, Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2018, p. 91-111.

[4] Emilie Doutreloux refers in this case to the work of KYMLICKA, W. and P. SAVIDAN. *La citoyenneté multiculturelle : une théorie libérale du droit des minorités*, Montréal, La découverte, Boréal, 2001.

intention of recognizing the injustices of inclusion, as well as the proactive actions advocated, stem from this model. Thus, an individual may realize that their relationship to diversity may match a stance that is related more to one model than another. An individual who sees themself as very open to differences and who believes that these differ-ences enrich society might ask themself whether they are taking actions that are consistent with this stance — do they succeed in promoting difference, for example— and set out to be more proactive, as the anti-racist model proposes. Personally, I think that looking at inclusion without the anti-racism dimension would be futile, similar to focusing on the symptoms of injustice without addressing the root causes. By thinking critically about the orientations of our vision of inclusion, and by considering the dimensions of other models from which inclusion is derived—each of which offers us avenues to deepen our understanding of the issue—we can come to understand where we stand and where we want to go. This clarification also has the advantage of facilitating the discussion that leads to action!

CB — That's the big question: what can we do, concretely, from a pedagogical perspective, to support the principles of EDI?

ED — Well, let's remember that the end goal is inclusion, while the point of departure is the recognition of diversity. So the first step, pedagogically, is to find ways to know the composition of one's groups. Whether it is through a questionnaire designed by teaching staff or by consulting data from a study conducted by one's institution, it is paramount to be interested in diversity, in knowing the existence of the minority groups of students in a class and the respective issues they face.

CB — We need to be aware of this, but we also need to care about it rather than rejecting this difference as something that does not concern us.

ED — Exactly. Once there, several avenues allow us to move toward inclusion. Equity is one of them.

CB — Meaning? In this regard, I guess the distinction between equity and the notion of equality is important… When you say equity is a pathway to being more inclusive, I'm assuming you don't just mean that teachers need to make sure they don't favour or disadvantage anyone, right?

ED — Inclusion takes into account the causes and effects of inequalities that exist in society. In this context, equity is about distributing according to the needs related to the causes and effects of these inequalities. So when an educator says that all students are treated equally because they receive identical treatment, from an inclusive perspective, this is a mistake: in a context where diversity is considered and where, therefore, a diversity of backgrounds and needs is recognized, giving equal treatment to all literally goes against the notion of equity. To give an example, a teacher who accepts that an allophone person is entitled to a translation dictionary during an exam, even though their classmates cannot use a dictionary, is acting in an equitable manner, since they are rebalancing the chances for this person according to the obstacle that their linguistic particularity represents in the context of the evaluation.
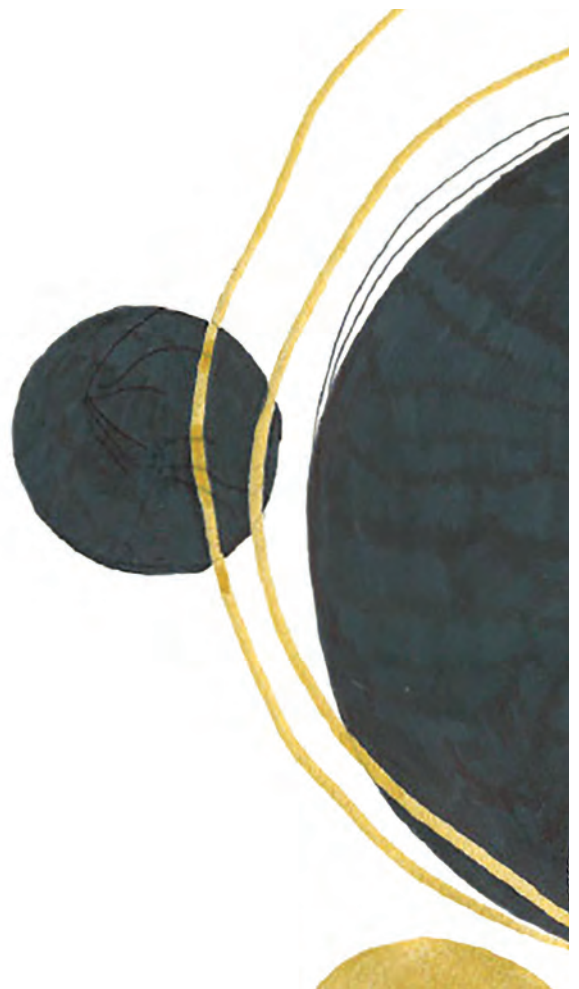
Source: Lea Job

CB — Isn't this an example of accommodation, much like what is offered to students with learning disabilities? I'm not sure I'm in a position, as a teacher, to judge what accommodations they are or are not entitled to from an equity perspective… I'm not even sure I have the right to grant them as I see fit!

ED — Allowing someone to use a translation dictionary, I don't know if that's really an accommodation. Accommodation implies compromise, and compromise implies a mutual concession. The fact that someone is entitled to a translation dictionary will not take anything away from the teacher or the student community. Consider another example: a student with an attention deficit disorder who is offered seclusion in another room to shut out the noise. The way in which this person is helped will be an accommodation because a practice or general rule of operation will be adapted for a person who is at a disadvantage. We will choose to invest resources to provide this space, hire a person to supervise, etc. But let's imagine that we choose to simply offer universal measures rather than piecemeal accommodations and offer, for example, the ability to borrow a pair of noise-cancelling headphones or a panel to isolate oneself from distractions to everyone who feels the need. Because, let's not forget—since we're talking about students with learning disabilities—not everyone in the student population has the means or resources to get a diagnosis and therefore receive adapted services. By implementing such measures, we could move away from a structure of segregation where these individuals are kept apart to one of inclusion.

CB — Phew, I'm confused… Well, exclusion, that's clear. Segregation means we separate individuals from the group; I get that, too. But integration and inclusion… in your last example, aren't the notions of integration and inclusion equivalent?

ED — Yes and no… Integration would mean accepting that individuals identified as different from the whole—in the example mentioned, students with a learning disability —should be treated fairly by being provided with noise cancelling headphones. Inclusion is about coexisting in a way that makes everyone feels valued. In this case, universal measures—headphones for everyone who asks for them— would achieve this. Let's take another example: let's say we want to take action to increase the sense of belonging and the retention of Indigenous people in college institutions.

According to the integration paradigm, we would welcome them and show them around the CEGEP, making sure they understand the rules in place; in other words, we accept them in an environment to which they must adapt. If we are inclusive, we could decide to install signage containing Indigenous languages; in this case, we would try to adapt the environment to all of the people using it.

Figure 1   **Distinction between inclusion, exclusion, segregation and integration**
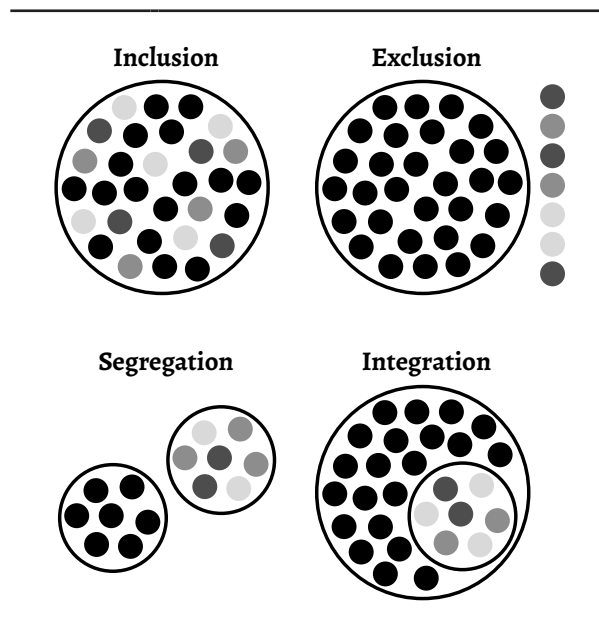
CB — But are we really doing the student community a service by doing this? After all, it doesn't work like that in the outside world. It's individuals who have to adapt to their environment, not the other way around. Right?

ED — I think it depends on how we see our role and especially the role of college. From an inclusion perspective, individuals perceive that it is their responsibility to engage in identifying and correcting injustices and inequities—and that this duty far outweighs the duty to comply with standards. When discussing individuals or groups of individuals who may experience discrimination, we often hear about the notion of resilience. In the current discourse, resilience is positively connoted as an asset, a strength. But I think we need to remember that the notion of resilience is also linked to hardship.

If an individual is confronted with structures that are too rigid and they have to start over three times to understand and respect the codes, is that really a good thing? As a micro-society, can the college network really wash its hands of the hardships that individuals are put through just because they don't fit into the current structures? Is it not our duty to recognize that certain practices are discriminatory and to try to soften what is too rigid—since we have the power to do so? I believe that the fundamental role of education, and therefore of colleges, is to propel society forward, not just to prepare individuals to adapt to it. Our students of today are the society of tomorrow. We are part of history, and we have a role to play in it. We must not stop at what is currently possible. For example, should we refuse a student who wants to enroll in a Respiratory and Anaesthesia Technology program because they are mute? On the pretext that the community will not accept them? Perhaps it is enough to have one such person working in a hospital to realize that it is possible. That "possibility," which could take so many forms, may be our current students. It is up to us to give them the opportunity to make a difference in this society that is also theirs.

CB — Yes… When you put it that way. It's still hard, as a teacher, to see a student on a path that might not lead to anything. But at the same time, how many women had to face failure and rejection before we saw the first female doctor, or astronaut, or engineer? If you think about it, it's perhaps a bit patronizing to want to tell a person what they can and cannot do. In your example, the mute student would probably be very aware—and more so than we are—of the challenges ahead. If they are wiling to take the risk—which is, in the end, much greater for them than for us—I think it's rather our duty to try to support them in this. But how? To get there, you were pointing out earlier that there are universal practices that can be adopted. Are there other actions we can take as educators?

ED — Yes, absolutely. I mentioned the notion of equity; well, you should know that there is such a thing as the pedagogy of equity.[5] If I stick to the practical application, the pedagogy of equity proposes to consider equity along four dimensions, which are in fact continuums in which inequities occur, and to act on these axes.

First, there is the *speech/silence* axis. A teacher who wants to intervene on this axis will try to bring individuals who have been silenced out of invisibility so that they feel considered. This can consist of encouraging different individuals in a group to speak up, by fostering the sharing of experiences, or by giving them opportunities to express themselves in different forms (in writing or speaking, through images, etc.).

Then there is the *recognition/omission* axis. This might involve, for example, a history teacher asking their students to complete an assignment on groups that are absent from history. Why aren't they mentioned? A teacher wishing to act on this axis will want to get their students to revise their vision of things, of what they know about the world, to point out that this knowledge is partial and that there are groups whose experiences have been omitted.

There is also the axis of active *participation/passivity.* Educators who are sensitive to this axis will want to build on the richness of different strengths and points of view and give each person a concrete place in the learning process. They will therefore set up cooperative structures where diversity can allow each person to assume a role that will allow them to realize their potential and feel valued.

Finally, there is the axis of *powerlessness/power-sharing*, where educators will be keen to demystify the subject matter being taught and to introduce some critical thinking in relation to the dominant models of thought. A biology teacher could, for example, present methods used by scientists to conserve the balance of biodiversity, while at the same time inviting an Indigenous elder to explain equivalent practices from another perspective. In philosophy, one could think of a teacher who would present reflective models acting as alternatives to critical thinking, such as caring thinking, which originates in feminist models.

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5 Editor's note: Readers interested in this topic may wish to refer to the article "The Pedagogy of Equity: Fostering Equal Opportunity" by Emilie Doutreloux in *Pédagogie collégiale*, Summer 2019 (Vol. 32, n°. 4).

CB — These are very interesting avenues... In my department, we've adopted a guideline to give voice to female authors in every course... I guess that would be another way to work on the speech/silence axis. I could also see myself interacting with the recognition/omission axis, asking my students to think about why an author decides to give voice to certain characters, or reveal their thoughts and personality, while deciding to confine others to secondary roles. I think this could lead to an important reflection on cognitive biases and our representations of others. It provides a lot of food for thought... But it's also quite the commitment!

ED — Universal design for learning (UDL) practices, like the pedagogy of equity, are indeed good approaches to moving toward inclusion... but in fact, any teacher who wants to try to improve inclusion in their classrooms could simply work backward and ask themselves what, if any, elements of their pedagogy are excluding individuals. They might ask themself three questions: 1) Who benefits from the pedagogical practice employed? 2) Who is excluded from or disadvantaged by the pedagogical practice? 3) Have I consulted the various marginalized groups? With this reflection, any teacher sets the table for action by better identifying the issues they face. Alternatively, they can attempt to reflect on their course environment and teaching by trying to put themself in the shoes of marginalized groups. Will a student with a learning disability that affects their reading be able to listen to audiobooks? Do visible minorities have a chance to recognize themselves in the illustrations in their biology or Early Childhood Education course materials? Have I tried to ensure that exam dates do not coincide with celebrations important to cultural and religious minorities? Will non-binary people recognize themselves in the case study scenarios offered in Administration or Nursing? These are thousands of small details, which we often don't take care to focus on, that are reminders to minority groups that are not fully considered by the educational system. We also need to be careful about how we communicate with students and how we exercise our authority. I think teachers are familiar with the concept of unconscious bias. We know that we all have them, but in action, it's sometimes difficult to remain critical of ourselves. So we have to be very vigilant and, ideally, put in place structures that will neutralize, as much as possible, the possible biases that we might have—for example, using evaluation grids with descriptive scales or avoiding looking at the name on the students' assignments when we correct them.

CB — I guess when you start to actively pay attention to the principles of EDI, you might start to pay attention to a lot of things in your workplace... in the classroom, but also outside the classroom, right?

ED — Yes, absolutely. One way to do this is to direct our thinking to our departments and programs. Research tells us that members of the student population who can identify with teachers will be more successful and persistent. However, students from minority groups report that they do not recognize themselves in their teachers. Considering the importance of role models and knowing that department members, along with their human resources colleagues, have a role to play in hiring their colleagues, why not be proactive in this process? They can, for example, if human resources are not already doing so, suggest that applications be made through a standard form, or at least ask that they be given the resumes without the names of the applicants and the universities they attended. We know that we tend to want to select people who are similar to us. This means that we are bound to have to work hard and go against our instincts if we recognize the importance of diversity—because our instincts could get caught up in biases and the strong desire to connect with our peers.

CB — Could this kind of bias lead us to hesitate to take a candidate, for example, because we don't have the impression that they will fit in the department or the program?

ED — Let's say that this is an example of a premise that can very easily lead us to make unconscious acts of exclusion. I don't deny that it can be complicated to work with people who don't think like us or who work differently. Let's keep in mind that when faced with a problem to solve, diverse teams often come up with better solutions than homogeneous groups. This is because diverse teams are less likely to adopt a bias and therefore address a wider range of possibilities.

CB — This has been a really interesting discussion, Emilie; your commitment is frankly inspiring. How would you like to conclude this reflection on inclusion for our readers?

ED — I believe, as I said, that history is in the making, that we have arrived at a decisive moment where profound and lasting changes can and must be established. The pandemic has raised awareness: our experiences and findings give a second wind to the establishment of equal opportunities

through EDI principles. If we believe, as I do, that education contributes to the building of conscious societies that are peaceful and equipped to strive for justice, we cannot turn away from a part of the population and accept that they have disappointing educational experiences, or worse, no access to education—including higher education. For the common good, it is imperative that the dominant majority realize that they hold privileges that are part of historical systemic discrimination mechanisms. I believe deeply and firmly that college education will rise to the challenge and lead the way. For the sake of our students, but also for the sake of all of us, as we are all part of this society. ▬

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