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Diversity Matters: Race, Ethnicity, and the Future of Christian Higher Education

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*Diversity matters: Race, ethnicity,
& the future of Christian higher education*

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Reviewed by Cassie Isaacson

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In a global moment when division and fear abound, we need like-minded colleagues and leaders to help us prioritize our pursuits, pushing diversity and other crucial issues to the forefront. *Diversity Matters* is a collaborative work written by twenty-five higher education professionals who represent different positions at CCCU institutions all across the country, including Rebecca Hernandez (George Fox University), David Turk (Nyack College), Kimberly Battle-Walters Denu (Azusa Pacific University), and Allison N. Ash (Wheaton College). Each contributor explores a different aspect of faith-based higher education such as describing how a particular campus approaches diversity and inclusion, sharing the challenges of being a person of color employed by a CCCU school, or unpacking the role of white allies striving to support diversity efforts. An explicitly Christian text, this work identifies the need for a theological framework under which to function in order for Christian institutions to educate students with the kingdom of God in mind. The insights found in *Diversity Matters* fill a noticeable void in Christian higher education via poignant stories, practical strategies, and hope-inducing vision.

It is worth taking a moment to discuss two unifying, faith-based themes before highlighting the key points of *Diversity Matters*. The first theme is the Christian value of peace. This type of peace is not simply the absence of discord but rather the richness that a community can embody when everyone seeks the mutual service and sacrifice that Jesus emulated throughout his life. Kinoshita shares, “Shalom gave depth and meaning to my work in higher education, as I would frame the overarching vision and goals back to the concepts of thriving and wholeness for the people of God” (p. 107). The other Christian value evident in the text is a hope of something greater than what currently exists, and the unmistakable charge for Christ-followers to participate in the continual process of bringing God’s kingdom to earth. The current state of diversity in Christian higher education is not what it needs to be, but there is hope in little steps of progress and in people who have committed their lives to bringing God’s kingdom to earth in tangible ways. Jeanette L. Hsieh of Trinity International University writes, “It was important for me to see real progress, no matter how small or slow, and it was in that progress that I found meaning in my work” (p. 121).

Although there are numerous noteworthy ideas in this book, three key mandates from the authors are diligence, curiosity, and collaboration. First, many of the writers discuss the importance of being diligent and committed to the development of diversity in higher education. Setbacks come with the territory of diversity work because there are decades of oppression and inequality to overcome (p. 126). Nevertheless, Christians in higher education are called to bring dignity to every student, and a deep conviction of this call can be the difference between simply trying to make a difference and actually effecting change (p. 266). When diversity champions are met with opposition, and where institutional patterns of racism and privilege are deeply ingrained, positive efforts may not produce visible results for many years (p. 272). This kind of slow work is exhausting (p. 272). Rodney Sisco, a seasoned administrator at Wheaton College states, “Just as listening to a complex composition requires focus and diligence, so too does the conversation of diversity. Longevity in Christian higher education for me has been to find that balance of consistency and artistry akin to finding the groove of a song” (p. 147). These authors make it clear that shortcuts do not exist. Entering the realm of diversity and inclusion demands a commitment to march into the mess and to stay there, regardless of how many times the same age-old challenges arise.

The second mandate found throughout the text is curiosity. A curious approach to diversity work requires asking questions like “How does my experience shape the way I see others? What might I be missing that others are seeing?” (Visser, p. 213). These questions and others allow higher education professionals to see more than what one experience can provide and to understand which action steps are needed. When members of the white majority step into the diversity conversation, they will encounter the frustrating—yet decidedly true—narrative of privilege. Humble curiosity also helps to break down the “us versus them” mentality that is toxic and counterproductive when hearing the experiences of colleagues or students that differ from one’s own (p. 326). Simply being curious can turn a defensive skeptic into an enlightened advocate (p. 259) who will be equipped to create positive change.

Third, the authors convey the importance of working together. The text’s contributors hold job titles that identify them as champions of either diversity, multicultural awareness, or racial reconciliation on campus, but almost all of them emphasize that they could not do this work alone. One avenue for partnership is collaborating with a variety of offices or departments with the intention of achieving widespread ownership of diversity initiatives, programs, and events (p. 250). Yvonne RB-Banks, among others in the book, discusses the importance of finding a mentor or sponsor. This is particularly key for professionals of color, who will likely encounter barriers that are much easier to face with the support of someone who understands (p. 262). Another aspect of working together is the role of white allies. As those who are historically—and currently—underrepresented and unheard in the world of higher education, people of color need to be at the forefront of the diversity conversation. However, white professionals are crucial to this work as well and should empathetically seek out the most sensitive, strategic use of their privilege (p. 276). Educators who desire to engage in this work need to be proactive about forming a diverse network of staff and faculty who are committed to diligence, curiosity, and forward movement.

Diversity Matters is an invaluable resource for professionals in Christian higher education. Those who would like to be more informed about the state of diversity in Christian higher education will find this resource a helpful tool in understanding the current climate in the field. It provides facts, first-hand accounts, and academic accounts of the challenges and roadblocks preventing progress in the area of interracial competency.

This work serves as a handbook of advice and encouragement for Christian educators. Rich testimonies of professionals of color and their white allies who have navigated their way through decades of diversity work in higher education are interwoven with some of the lessons they have learned along the way. This text delivers an unmistakable admonition to care deeply about diversity and inclusion, regardless of one's role on campus. Christian higher education has a huge platform in this "kairos moment," as Pete C. Menjares puts it, to shape the lives of an increasingly heterogeneous population (p. 13). A recognition that diversity matters, and an understanding of why it matters, is the first step towards providing an excellent, holistic, transformative education for every single student.

Cassie Isaacson will complete her Master of Arts in Higher Education from John Brown University in May 2018