

Role of Diversity and Inclusion Offices in Campus Protests

Podcast Transcript

Prevention and Protection a United Educators Risk Management Podcast

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Guests:

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KIMBERLY: Hello. And welcome to *Prevention and Protection*, the UE risk management podcast. I'm Kimberly Cole, risk management counsel. I'm excited to have join me today Dr. Leah Cox. Dr. Cox is a diversity and inclusion professional with over 25 years of experience. Dr. Cox, thank you so much for joining us today.

DR. COX: Thank you for having me, Kimberly.

KIMBERLY: I'm pleased to have you as a guest on the podcast to talk about the role of diversity and inclusion professionals in the wake of recent campus protests. Can you tell our audience a little bit about your background and the work that you currently do?

DR. COX: I'm currently the vice president for inclusion and institutional equity at Towson University in Baltimore, Md. This is an inaugural role here at Towson. The work at Towson requires an institutional focus, which is aligned with the president's priorities for the university, designed to create a more diverse and inclusive campus. Our commitment to diversity is grounded in respect and inclusion to enrich the educational experience. Diversity inclusion professionals across higher education work to create a welcoming and peaceful campus community that's respectful of all, to close things like the achievement gap, to promote equity and social justice. Prior to coming to Towson, I was the diversity officer and special assistant to the president at the University of Mary Washington, which is a much smaller institution, but the work is still centered around creating more diversity and inclusive environment for students, faculty, and staff.

KIMBERLY: You have a very interesting background and certainly do interesting work. You've been in this space for over 25 years. Have you seen the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion evolve on higher ed campuses in recent years?

KIMBERLY: Previous efforts focused on multicultural student affairs for most of us in higher education or a curricular change, where things were headed, and largely student facing. More recently, campuses have become much more intentional and doing the work that's required to create the campuses, to make sure that they address the needs of all our students, our

faculty, and our staff. It's become more than just providing cultural programs across our campuses. The issues that they were facing now are far greater than just student programs but require that we address inequities that exist at all levels of our institutions. The work of chief diversity officers now has been elevated on the organizational chart because it recognizes that real change requires that all parts of the institution be touched, and most often and probably, always requires presidential support. Over the last five years, I've seen the number of vice presidents for inclusion or chief diversity officers (CDO) increase. Most of them are properly supported by their universities, which are recognizing that the work of the CDOs has a positive impact for everyone across the institution.



KIMBERLY: Absolutely. I'm sure we'll continue to see this growth in this sort of practice. Let's talk about your office more specifically. The goal of academia is to create an intellectually rigorous learning environment where new ideas are developed and challenged. To achieve these goals, students, faculty, and administrators may be required to experience some discomfort, and, sometimes, even offense while exploring these ideas. How does the Office of Inclusion and Institutional Equity balance principles of free speech and academic freedom with values of inclusion, safety, and order on campus, and deciding how to address this conflict when raised?

DR. COX: It's a difficult conversation where we have to look at the values and beliefs, and that may be personal, and may have existed for us without exploration or justification in many instances. I think it's important that offices of inclusion create safe spaces and forums for conversations around these issues, these issues of freedom of speech. Students on our campuses should, and we hope, should have the opportunity to engage in freedom of expression without fear or threat and be able to express themselves without betrayal or hate. We want to allow intellectual engagement. That's what we're here for in higher education, and exchange on a variety of topics that may challenge one's beliefs and values. However, we know it has to be respectful and civil.

Our ability to have those conversations and to have speakers and programs that engage in an exchange of ideas and of values, similarly, is important in the growth and education of our students. We want students to be prepared when they leave our campuses, to be ready to be part of a democratic institution wherever they may go or work. We have to understand that everyone may not believe or have a social justice mindset, but everyone has the right to express themselves in our educational setting. So we're doing our job so long as we create these spaces for this to take place, which is very difficult. When conflicts arise, the response on our campuses has to be quick, it has to be unified, and its message that threats, violence, and criminal acts will not be tolerated on our campus. And it has to come from many places across the campus, the messages that we send out to our students, faculty, and staff.

KIMBERLY: That's excellent advice. Now, I want to talk about the student protests at the University of Missouri in November 2015. Although student protests are certainly not new, this particular event seems to have been a catalyst for many of the recent students-led protests in response to racial tensions on campus. Why do you think that is?

DR. COX: Student protests aren't new to our campuses. Probably, over 50 years ago, college campuses experienced protests around equal access, civil rights, Vietnam War, affirmative action, a number of topics. And some of our campuses, and it's sort of a moment of load progress during the 80s and 90s, the effort and work that took place during the late 60s and 70s service kind of slow down. And so while there was still work being done on diversifying our institutions, that work did

not focus on ideas of inclusive excellence. So, in many ways, Missouri became kind of a catalyst for institutions because it highlighted that the issues that were plaguing our nation, were also a part of our university campuses. Many of our campuses still host a culture of racism that has not been addressed. But fortunately, the protests that took place in Missouri has students complaining of an action in the face of racial bigotry. And then, as you know, a graduate student who began a hunger strike, and then it took the football team to come to the forefront of this protest around racial slurs, harassment, microaggressions in the classroom, all of these things were part of that protest.

So, the students were demanding some profound changes in the systematic racism that's prevalent on campuses across our nation. These experiences were felt across the country by all of our campuses. And in many ways, Missouri was the perfect storm for college presidents and administrators, historically, white institutions throughout the country to take another look at a need for change. It became apparent that the workaround diversity and inclusion needed to continue in a more intentional way. And many of our universities, the work was already taking place but lacked support and attention. So, Missouri alerted higher education leaders across the nation that need to be ready to start taking action and to make some changes. Our boards, our presidents saw applications starting to decline and students making demands for services that had been withheld or neglected. Conversations that were happening had been ignored and financial support of programs were being demanded once again. So, the students that are coming to our institutions now are coming to us with a social justice lens, and a spirit of speaking up against injustice.

KIMBERLY: Right. And students are not just speaking out against racial injustices. There have been protests about gender equity, religion, and other social issues on campus. One of the most frequent demands student groups have made of administrators following these protests is the hiring and/or increased visibility of senior-level diversity inclusion professionals on campus, to help better educate the campus community around all of these issues. Why is having a diversity professional at the highest administrative level important?

DR. COX: The chief diversity officer or CDO, we call that person, has a leadership role on a campus that requires them to build relationships, facilitate collaboration, inspire allies and stakeholders, create change, implement policies and programs, and possess an understanding of the history and culture of the institution's environment with a degree of sensitivity that many who walk in that spaces do not have or possess. Which means that for that CDO, they have to be a part of the senior leadership on the campus with direct access to the president or provost, and, in my mind, both, is ideal because the diversity benefits everyone. It's not just for our students. It's for everyone, our faculty, our staff, and the community.



The CDO has to explore ways that they can improve the organizational culture and the quality of the entire campus community. So it's become apparent that to create some real change in our campuses, there has to be someone at the table where decisions are being made about enrollment, about admissions, about hiring, strategies, finance, marketing, student programming, scholarships, and university advancement, just about everything. The only way to create that inclusive excellence is for someone whose main focus is to create a culture of change around equity, and to be an equal partner at the table where the decisions are being made.

KIMBERLY: Student groups have also been demanding increased training for students, staff, faculty, and administrators on subjects of inclusion and belonging. Your campus has approximately 23,000 students and thousands

of faculties, staffs, and administrators. In a community of this size, how do you ensure that each constituency is properly trained on how to engage with one another as a part of an inclusive community?

DR. COX: It's a big job. It's a very big job. You have to begin with getting everyone to be part of a plan for inclusive excellence. You have to have a president who is willing to support the work that's needed on the campus. The training has to be at all levels and continuous across the institution. This past year, training involved here at Towson all of our senior leadership of the institution, which focused on systemic racism and unconscious bias. The senior staff have now begun providing the same kinds of training and discussions for their staff to assist them in understanding how to begin changing the climate, and the culture, and the work that they do. So, over the last few years, Towson began by requiring all of the colleges to develop diversity action plans that included training for its faculty, and one that begins to look at the development of courses and the curriculum in each of the colleges. We're now looking at ways that training can be provided to all of our faculty, all of our staff on a regular basis in multiple ways.

Some institutions are requiring online training on diversity as just one mechanism for assisting with providing education on diversity and inclusivity. Our student affairs divisions have been instrumental in making sure that continuous training is provided to our staff, our student leaders, and students across the campus. In addition, they provide programming and cultural competency training for multiple units and departments across our campus. We've also begun to hold multiple all-day workshops and conferences for our faculty and staff that focus on having some very difficult conversations around race, bias, cultural competency, and how this affects the work that we do in higher education. It also impacts training related to the recruitment and retention of our diverse faculty and staff. So, here we work with our HR professionals to support the work of training all the employees on inclusion and cultural competency. We also seek to create a more inclusive space for all of our employees in terms of how we address the biases when they happen. So, we're working to train everyone. The training, education, and programming have to be ongoing. We have to constantly come up with new ways to infuse these messages of civility, social justice, and equity, in everything that we do.



KIMBERLY: These messages of civility, social justice, and equity are particularly important in light of the fact that hate groups seem to be more frequently descending on campuses throughout the United States and are being met by protesters when they arrive. One of the most highly publicized events occurred on the campus of the University of Virginia in August 2017. How are diversity and inclusion professionals instrumental in helping to shape how institutions respond to these incidents?

DR. COX: It's become clear that the work that we do as diversity professionals, we have to do the work before hate groups arrive on our campus. And that's really important. Holding discussions, forums, classes, and debates around issues of free speech, hate speech, and political ideologies during new student orientation in our classes, in our residence life programs, during student activities, the training that we provide for our student organization leaders, and other venues across the campus. We have to be prepared before these speakers determine that they want to be part of our campus....Our time, time, place, and manner policy should be clear and available to protect the institution for scheduling outside organizations from disrupting our campuses. And we also have to prepare students for how to peacefully debate these issues of hate, bias, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, all of these things.

KIMBERLY: How has social media impacted the work that you do?

DR. COX: It's a help and a hindrance in the work that we do. It's a hindrance when rumors and falsehoods are perpetuated through social media posts. Additionally, information is shared so willfully, as you know, that it's often hard to get ahead of it and pull it back, especially when it's false or inflammatory information. But it becomes helpful in providing messaging and information for campuses regarding issues that may be potentially harmful, or those that support for various issues that would be possible for the campus to disseminate quickly that they couldn't do years ago. So, social media sort of provides new insights to help us gauge the pulse of the campus climate and begin to shape programming and responses around various messages that we monitor on social media. So, we're always very thankful of our communications department.

KIMBERLY: You just mentioned campus climate, as the vice president of inclusion and institutional equity, you certainly lead and own the work of the office for inclusion and institutional equity. However, your team cannot do the work of creating an inclusive campus climate alone, who are some of the other critical participants in this work?

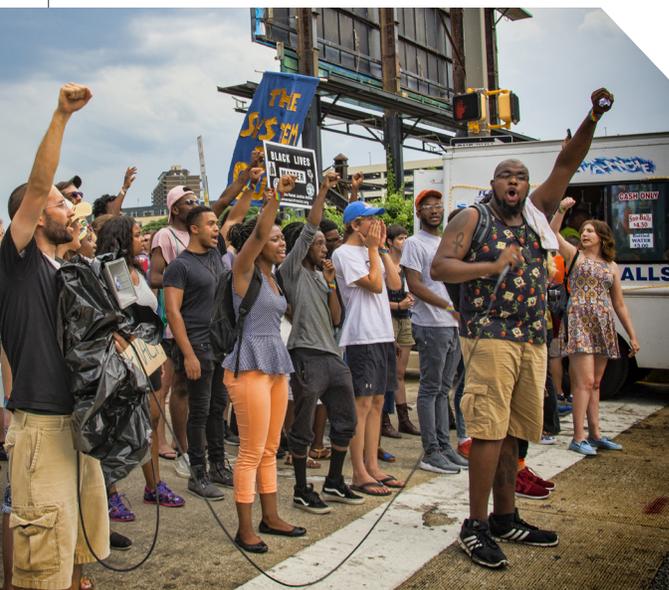
DR. COX: Everyone has to be a partner, and we have many, many partners in this work. So, the members of student affairs who work with our students every day and often are the first to provide the support, the mentoring, the programming, and leadership that's important in creating inclusive institutions, the provost, and academic affairs team from the chief academic officers to our faculty who can provide the knowledge, and advising, and support the students need often. We have faculty who come to us with a social justice lens that help to create those safe spaces for our students to learn and challenge themselves without fear.

Our marketing and communications offices, this work would be even more difficult without their help in monitoring social media or helping to create the messaging that may need to be disseminated to the community in a crisis, but also helping to make sure that an equity lens is used in the messages, in the marketing of our websites, materials, and branding of the institution, promote that equity lens. Our general counsel is key, and I do mean key in helping to make sure that we lawfully and thoughtfully manage many of the issues we deal with around equity, compliance, and free speech. Our partners in safety and security are key to making sure that our students, faculty, and staff feel safe on campus and in the surrounding communities. And when hate bias incidents take place that they react promptly. And that without their partnership, it would be more difficult to manage incidents or protest. And lastly, the biggest partner can be your university president. The president of your institution can set the tone for the campus. They can make a huge difference in the work that we do and in the support that we'll need in creating that campus of inclusive excellence.

KIMBERLY: Well, it seems like the work and the responsibilities is very far-reaching. How can every other person on campus engage in this work?

DR. COX: I truly believe that everyone can begin by receiving education around the issues of inclusion, equity, implicit bias, and cultural competency, attending any programs or engaging with individuals who are different from you, participating in group dialogues to help begin to talk about change around these very, very difficult conversations will really help any campus.

KIMBERLY: Very good. One final question for you, Dr. Cox. What work remains to be done to advance efforts to create more inclusive environments on college campuses?



DR. COX: There's a lot of work to be done. So, to support our underrepresented students, and faculty, and staff so that they are not micro aggressive, excluded, or threatened on our campuses, to provide continuous education and training to all members of our campus around all of the issues related to diversity and inclusion. And lastly, helping individuals recognize their bias. And then beginning the work to make changes to the climate and the systemic inequities that keep our institutions from reaching inclusive excellence.

KIMBERLY: Thank you very much, Dr. Cox for your time. It's been a pleasure speaking with you. This has been a very informative discussion. For our listeners, in addition to this topic, you can find other podcasts and risk management publications, including other resources regarding campus protests, on our website, **EduRiskSolutions**. I encourage you to check out our website if you haven't already. From United Educators Insurance, this is the *Prevention and Protection* podcast.



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