From Innovations to Isomorphism in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Efforts:

Opportunities and Cautions for Higher Education

By Julie R. Posselt

Julie R. Posselt (posselt@usc.edu) is Associate Dean of the University of Southern California, Associate Professor in the Pullias Center for Higher Education, and President of the Sociology of Education Association. She directs the Equity in Graduate Education Consortium as well as the NSF-INCLUDES Inclusive Graduate Education Network Research Hub.

In Short

- Repressive legal environments breed caution among organizations and their leaders, as well as collective convergence (i.e., isomorphism) on actions viewed as ostensibly "safe" moves for advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI).
- Mimetic, coercive, and normative isomorphism are mechanisms of sectorwide convergence that are reflected in U.S. doctoral education via movements toward eliminating Graduate Record Examination requirements, creating bridge programs, and reforming doctoral qualifying exams.
- While beneficial for aggregate patterns of representation, without careful implementation isomorphic changes may preserve unequal power relations or create new inequalities that DEI and systemic change efforts exist to transform.
- Thoughtful leadership of isomorphism involves new tactics associated with the social comparison that is inherent to this type of change.

Shortly before the U. S. Supreme Court delivered its decisions in the 2003 *Grutter* and *Gratz* admissions cases, an important essay by higher education scholar Mitchell Chang (2002) cautioned that a sectorwide move toward diversity in the United States risked undermining itself if the movement maintained a narrow focus on the demographic composition of students. He wrote,

> If educators, particularly those in positions of leadership, fail to develop a fuller understanding and appreciation of campus diversity, their short-sightedness may both arrest educational potential and preserve the broader set of arrangements and institutional practices that diversity advocates seek to transform. (p. 136)

He acknowledged the legal origins of the stance that most universities seemed to be taking, particularly the 1978 U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Regents of the University of California vs. Bakke* that ruled diversity the only "compelling interest" for race-conscious admissions. In the 20 years since Chang's essay, the push for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in higher education has become so entrenched that we also see institutions converging on ostensibly "safe" actions for achieving it.

Sector convergence is known as *isomorphism,* and it has been defined by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) as "a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions" (p. 149). As higher education institutions prepare for two decisions from the Supreme Court this year on cases involving race-conscious admissions, understanding how isomorphism works can be useful. With this understanding, we can see more clearly how innovations spread and how everyday pressures connect to larger movements. This understanding also can help us resist known risks of isomorphic change. When such changes are made without careful attention to the local context, the spread of innovations aimed at diversity may unwittingly preserve unequal power relations that DEI and systemic change efforts exist to transform.

In this article, I discuss the mechanisms of isomorphism through three examples of organizational actions for DEI in doctoral education: eliminating Graduate Record Examination (GRE) requirements, adopting bridge programs, and reforming doctoral qualifying exams. Although these actions were once experiments and innovations, isomorphic forces and their underlying status considerations have encouraged their spread and this spread has made clear the need for thoughtful implementation. The examples here are from doctoral education, but isomorphism offers a framework for understanding reform efforts and innovations throughout higher education. Social comparison within status hierarchies is the heart of isomorphic change, and if it is not managed with care, potentially transformative moves may prove to yield little more than momentary enthusiasm—and may even undermine their original aims by creating new inequalities. I therefore close the article with recommendations for leveraging isomorphic influences while managing social comparison risks by protecting learning, community, assessment, and justice—all within difficult political circumstances.

The context of this work for me is two research–practice partnerships (RPP) that I have helped develop: the Equity in Graduate Education Consortium (known during its pilot as the California Consortium for Inclusive Doctoral Education, or C-CIDE) and the NSF INCLUDES Alliance Inclusive Graduate Education Network (IGEN). RPPs are, in the words of the W. T. Grant Foundation (n.d.), "long-term, mutually beneficial collaborations that promote the production and use of research" (section 1, para. 1). Lessons from the similarities and differences of these two projects are a topic for another day[1]; however, both help higher education organizations and their leaders align means of selecting and training STEM graduate students with DEI goals. Paired with my research on organizational behavior in higher education, leading these RPPs has given me a unique perspective on these practices, including their potential and their risks.

[1]Despite apparent similarity in their names, these projects engage differently with different types of organizations, have different goals and activities, different project structures and cultures, different budget priorities, and hold different theories of change.

Portraits Of Sectorwide Convergence

Movement Away From the GRE: Mimetic Isomorphism

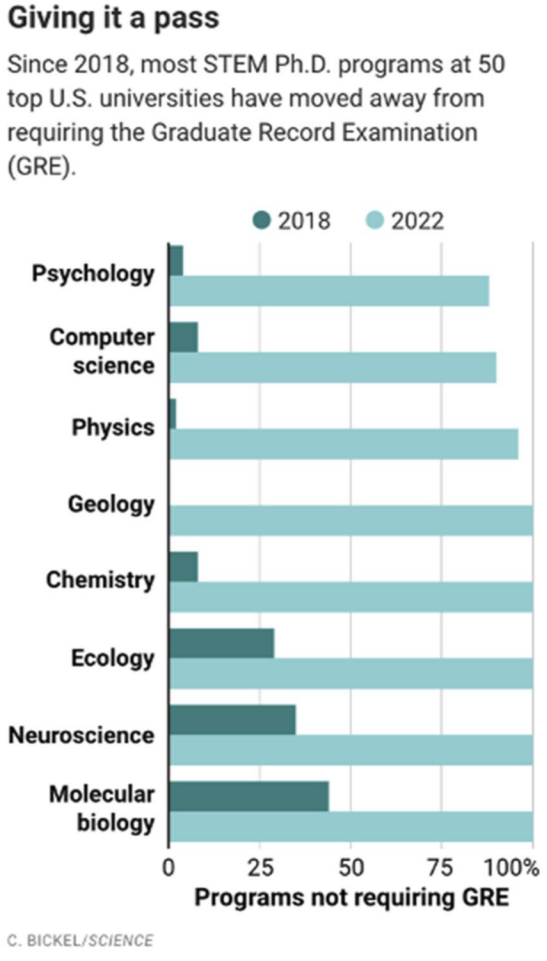
When influential organizations in a field move together, making changes aligned with DEI interests or otherwise, it can catalyze fieldwide change. *Mimetic isomorphism* describes the tendency of middle and lower status organizations to imitate the changes of more powerful organizations in their field. It also takes place when diffusion of a new practice or policy reaches a tipping point, and what was once a minority viewpoint overturns previous consensus. Mimetic isomorphism is especially likely to occur under conditions of uncertainty, which may help explain why COVID-19 expanded and accelerated the wave of U.S. PhD programs eliminating GRE requirements for admission.

This pattern was a long time in the making. For decades, scholars penned concerns and analyses about how racial disparities in test scores, combined with decision makers' use of "explicit cutoffs or tacit minima" (Sternberg & Williams, 1977, p. 630), disproportionately exclude minoritized students. Tests are also expensive to prepare for, take, and send scores to universities. Requiring score submission as part of applications therefore creates a cascading set of racialized barriers, despite evidence that test scores do not reliably predict who finishes the PhD. These requirements hurt students who may thrive in resource-rich learning environments but are more subject to stereotype threat in their test performance and those who did not have access to high-quality schooling from an early age. This wave of change is part of similar trends in undergraduate and professional education sectors, where test-optional, test-flexible, and test-free admissions are also becoming the norm.

Mimetic movement away from test scores is happening within and across disciplines, with STEM fields leading the way (see Figure 1). Astronomy offers a clear example. Through a combination of equity-minded advocacy in 2015–2016 from the American Astronomical Society's president and board of directors, along with the coordinated action of several top-ranked PhD programs in the field, a sea change occurred in the field in a relatively short time. A small group of top programs came together in what one Harvard astrophysicist described to me as "a move of mutual disarmament." They recognized that, by moving together, they could minimize negative consequences to their rankings and set a positive example for their own field and that of their close disciplinary neighbor, physics. Indeed, a wave of astronomy and joint astronomy–physics programs eliminated GRE score requirements over the next 5 years. As of summer 2022, only 11 of 162 Astronomy PhD programs still required GRE scores.

The case of astronomy suggests that mimetic isomorphism can be leveraged in support of DEI values when leading organizations use their privileged position to challenge the status quo. What has been called #GREexit eliminates a barrier that is both functional for institutional decision makers and symbolic for prospective students. The University of California system

Figure 1. Movement Away From the GRE In STEM.



> In the physical sciences and other fields, postbaccalaureate bridge programs have been created to help close gaps between minoritized students' BS and PhD attainment rates.

found that implementing a test-optional and test-free undergraduate admissions policy increased both the compositional diversity of who applied and who was admitted. The changes in application patterns point to systemic impacts of eliminating test scores that should not be understated.

However, as a new National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2023) report concludes, eliminating test scores should be part of a larger process needed of peeling back layers of racism in our gatekeeping systems. *Change* magazine is replete with evidence that single policy levers are insufficient to produce long-term, substantive cultural change. And research from C-CIDE found that programs abandoning the GRE from "peer pressure" or concerns about "competitive disadvantage" were among the least ready to make the substantive changes needed in other parts of their admissions process. Also worthy of revisiting are the expectations for certain experiences and training we like to see from doctoral applicants (and why we like to see them) and the biases baked into our standard procedures. For example, file review under GRE-free policy is easier to keep consistent than under test-optional policy, although there are examples of how to do test-optional in fair ways. It's important to track how other information about applicants is introduced, combined, and weighted in decisions.

The upshot is that eliminating GRE scores is a positive step for the field, but leaders must carefully manage implementation. We learned in research with C-CIDE that the "how" of admissions is just as important as "what" we consider and that managing the dialog around change is as important for creating equitable admissions processes as the change itself.

Coercive Isomorphism: The Spread of Bridge Programs

Coercive isomorphism is convergence around some organizational behavior that occurs due to pressures from changing cultural expectations or changing requirements of resource providers. Given how higher education institutions depend on federal funding, for example, when the National Science Foundation (NSF) changed requirements for federal grants and contracts to include the broader impacts criterion, it reshaped how institutional actors everywhere worked to craft what would count as meritorious proposals. Similarly, it was not coincidence that as support for the Black Lives Matter movement surged in summer 2020, so did universities' public expressions of support. Whether the incentives at hand are money, accreditation, status, or respect, calls to change incentive structures are calls to leverage coercive isomorphism.

In the physical sciences and other fields, postbaccalaureate bridge programs have been created to help close gaps between minoritized students' BS and PhD attainment rates. Bridge programs vary so widely in design and detail that generalizable claims about the supports they provide are difficult to make. They do, however, provide minoritized students with access to graduate-level admission, coursework, research, and/or mentoring experiences. And, importantly for understanding their spread, they help departments solve a

> **Bridge programs offer a convenient means for PhD programs to enroll one or two racially minoritized students each year, and being named as a bridge site has become a cue in the community that some change is underway.**

basic problem: As the U.S. population diversifies, organizational diversity is an increasingly important signal of legitimacy. However, standard practices in how we select and serve students are often racially exclusionary, enrolled students often experience negative climates, and departments struggle to mobilize the resources (human, motivational, time) required to create and sustain DEI. Change can be time-intensive and contentious, and many PhD programs' leaders are ill equipped to talk about engrained racism in their policies and practices, much less deconstruct, reimagine, and change them. Therefore, academic departments, like other organizations, are looking for ways to accelerate diversity and "change their face" without having to change many policies and practices.

Bridge programs offer a convenient means for PhD programs to enroll one or two racially minoritized students each year, and being named as a bridge site has become a cue in the community that some change is underway. Leading societies like the American Chemical Society (ACS), American Geophysical Union, and the American Physical Society have identified 278 departments as bridge sites, partners, or members through IGEN. Societies have an annual application process for departments to host a bridge program; if selected, they are identified on their websites. In the ACS bridge project, programs are vetted for demonstrating "the potential to provide an environment where students could develop a sense of belonging" (personal communication). Affiliates gain access to prospective students who submit applications to a portal akin to the CommonApp, with no fees or test scores required. In some cases, bridge programs permit students direct or fast-tracked access to PhD programs. In other cases, selected students go through bridge activities before reapplying—this time, with a record better aligned with what PhD admissions typically privileges.

Bridge is helping close racial/ethnic graduate enrollment gaps at the field level; yet, as with eliminating GRE scores, how they are designed and carried out by societies and PhD programs is critical to effectiveness and equity. For example, among departments associated with IGEN bridge programs, some do not have budgets to fund their bridge fellows; this forces fellows to take on debt where the norm is to provide doctoral students with assistantships. Both in the IGEN external evaluation and in the larger research literature on bridge programs, students report widely varying experiences that include isolation (being one of a handful of minoritized students), racism and othering (from fellow students and faculty), and ambiguities about belonging (Gámez et al., 2022).

As studies of the Race Equality and Athena Swan Charters in the United Kingdom (which also offer opportunities for academic organizations to be identified for their equity work) have found, changes motivated by coercive isomorphic forces may only address surface issues. They "enhance the reputation of HEIs [Higher Education Institutions] and provide a smokescreen of conformity which gives the illusion of addressing racial disadvantages" (Bhopol & Pitkin, 2020, p. 531). When

> When we change the expectations and structures within training programs, it helps change how the next generation of professionals thinks and works.

organizations act mainly in response to pressures that they fall in line with their peers, it can yield box-ticking, "whitewashing," and impression management that are more performative than authentic.

Reforms in Doctoral Qualifying Exams: Normative Isomorphism or Just Status Management?

Normative isomorphism describes how professional training, including graduate and postdoctoral training, can encourage sector-level convergence. When we change the expectations and structures within training programs, it helps change how the next generation of professionals thinks and works. Especially potent is when a group of graduate training programs in a field implement a similar type of change, shifting how a whole sector is socialized. Changes in the American Psychological Association's accreditation standards to include the preparation of diverse professionals are one such example.

Another emerging example is changing doctoral qualifying exams and activities around the transition to candidacy. Qualifying exams were introduced early in the 20th century to assess subject-matter knowledge and readiness for dissertation research. From the beginning, they also served a gatekeeping function given concerns that dissertation defenses had devolved into a "rubber stamping" exercise. However, there are longstanding complaints about misalignment of exams' content with the work of scholars. Threats to student well-being are another area of concern, as illustrated by the vivid language of generations who have written about them (e.g., "an obstacle course and ritual gauntlet"; Estrem & Lucas, 2003, p. 397). As attention to DEI is overlaid on these complaints (e.g., that these high-stakes exams trigger stereotype threat and that they disproportionately weed out students from historically marginalized groups despite solid performance in courses and potential in research), more PhD programs are dropping conventional exams altogether.

A team of researchers and I conducted a survey-based landscape scan of qualifying and other candidacy exams in physical science PhD programs and then closely studied two PhD programs that changed their exams in the interest of diversity and student well-being. We found that the desire to maintain or achieve a favorable position in disciplinary status hierarchies affected which types of changes PhD programs were willing to entertain as possibilities.

A top-ranked PhD program in physics eliminated their qualifying exam entirely. They replaced it with no-stakes diagnostic tests in four subject areas. These tests are taken by every student upon entry, and the results either immediately classify the student as a candidate or trigger enrollment in relevant coursework. To become a candidate, students must earn grades of D or higher in these courses. The program felt confident in eliminating their qualifying exam entirely and setting the low bar of D grades because they believed their ranking and highly selective admissions process preselected for students who had the potential to become successful physicists.

The chemistry program that we studied was also status conscious and eliminated its high-stakes exam. However, as a middle-ranked program, they carefully designed a process to ensure their graduates would be viewed as legitimate in the field and to possibly improve the program's rankings. They created a series of

> Social comparison is the heart of isomorphism, and, as do leaders in other sectors that do not have a profit-based bottom line, academic leaders often calibrate performance through peer benchmarking.

activities to aid in the transition to candidacy, which helped students develop skills to write and defend a proposal using either NSF or National Institutes of Health (NIH) proposal guidelines. They also provided rich, relational professional development courses that included opportunities for students to practice communicating their work in written and spoken formats.

Status consciousness and sector-level dynamics are clear in our data: The findings are consistent with a U-shaped pattern in organizations' perceived freedom to innovate based on their status. Phillips and Zuckerman (2001) found high-status organizations feel confident to deviate wildly from conventional expectations. The elite physics program abandoning mid-program candidacy transition activities altogether is one example of this. Organizations that are low status may also feel free to defy conventions because they have little to lose. But, as we saw in chemistry, middle-ranked organizations seeking to protect or elevate their status choose changes that conform with field-level norms (Phillips & Zuckerman, 2001). Aligning the candidacy transition with standard NSF and NIH proposal requirements represents one way they designed reform with status in mind.

It is too soon to say whether isomorphic change will consist of collectively moving away from conventional exams generally or converging on a new, common candidacy model that shapes how scientists are collectively socialized. Early evidence, however, suggests the former, which would yield a situation much like the GRE's elimination. In those cases, as with bridge programs, design and implementation of new systems affect whether they offer an improvement vis à vis DEI.

The Social Comparison We Need

Social comparison is the heart of isomorphism, and, as do leaders in other sectors that do not have a profit-based bottom line, academic leaders often calibrate performance through peer benchmarking. We "look left, look right" to judge ourselves and assess potential shifts in strategy and, in doing so, collectively create sector-level standards. My experience suggests that we do not need to surrender looking left and looking right in DEI work—not at all. However, thoughtful implementation is required to make the most of possible benefits and avoid the risks of reproducing inequalities or creating new ones. For example, some bridge programs unwittingly created what participants experienced as a "second class," and some versions of test-optional admissions policy leave untouched key barriers to minoritized students' access that are inherent in other standard processes and criteria. The following sections offer several suggestions for wise implementation of changes sparked by isomorphic influences.

Weave Learning From Other Campuses Into a Broad-Based Approach to Systemic Change

Disconnected from a larger systemic analysis, good ideas may be difficult to sustain in practice or fall out of favor. Even well-intended actions can be

performative if, based on peer comparisons, we limit change to mimicry, if we have not put in the work to understand what our institutions need, or if we have not thought about how individual changes fit into a broader strategy. In C-CIDE and the Equity in Graduate Education Consortium, for example, successful cases of systemic change to admissions have come about by braiding attunement to environmental pressures (e.g., COVID-19), inspiration from consortium peers, and commitment to peeling back their own unquestioned assumptions. With the right wraparound work, isomorphic GRE policy change supported systemic change in routines for application, recruitment, file review, and more.

Learn From Peers and Others While Paving Your Own Path

An existentially challenging aspect of DEI and other relational leadership is that we can never know whether what we are doing will be sufficient to meet a particular threshold of change, given the myriad factors and forces simultaneously in play. There are two tendencies to avoid here. Some, especially those who are focused on keeping up with peers, may mimic trends without attention to the contextual demands in which a given change is being made. Others may be so caught up in their own department, university, or disciplinary life that they are unaware of potential solutions to common problems. The ideal balance is a locally customized, systems-minded approach in which leaders seek out and become knowledgeable about promising practices—and then make them their own.

Normalize New Metrics

A national focus on "broadening participation" and on representation in enrollment and degree attainment have yielded a sort of isomorphism in how we think about diversity performance. Meaningful assessment of organizational performance demands more than counting the sheer presence of humans from different backgrounds. Groups of organizations should also be tracking things like how we make and spend our money, in whom and what activities we invest our time, and which practices and policies we use in units throughout campus. In thoughtfully comparing organizations using multiple metrics—not just the characteristics of incoming and outgoing students—new conceptions of organizational excellence and mechanisms of institutional accountability may emerge for organizations to converge on.

Do Not Give Up on Justice

The political environment may be threatening, but history and long-term cultural change bid us not to give up on social justice. In times like these, it's worth being mindful of to whom we turn for comparison. Some peers' influence may dampen our aspirations, reinforce a fixation on status, promote undue caution, or emphasize what is palatable from a business standpoint over what is urgent to minoritized communities. The last of these is an especially notable risk, one that critical race theory predicts. Its tenet of interest convergence states that dominant groups do not concede changes that remediate racism unless they also have something to gain from the changes (Bell, 1980). The sectorwide rise of a business case for diversity epitomizes interest convergence. And, although we may need that case as part of a multifaceted paradigm for coalitional investment in DEI, we must not allow it to subvert the justice orientation that gave rise to this work (Georgeac & Rattan, 2022).

Tactics trending among management have been effectively preapproved by people who tend to be more cautious than the communities who have been excluded from higher education. Recognizing that a common equity detour is to pace change for the comfort of the privileged (Gorski, 2019), it is especially important that those of us in leadership positions pay attention to and pace our work not only in relation to one other but the diverse communities whom we aspire to represent. We are stronger in solidarity, within and across institutions, and we can find in that strength the courage and creativity to continue innovating in the face of stiff political headwinds. C

References

- Bell, D. A., Jr. (1980). Brown v. Board of Education and the interest-convergence dilemma. *Harvard Law Review*, *93*(3), 518–533. https://doi.org/10.2307/1340546
- Bhopal, K., & Pitkin, C. (2020). 'Same old story, just a different policy': Race and policy making in higher education in the UK. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *23*(4), 530–547.
- Chang, M. J. (2002). Preservation or transformation: Where's the real educational discourse on diversity? *The Review of Higher Education*, *25*(2), 125–140. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2002.0003
- DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, *48*(2), 147–160. https://doi.org/10.2307/2095101
- Estrem, H., & Lucas, B. E. (2003). Embedded traditions, uneven reform: The place of the comprehensive exam in composition and rhetoric PhD programs. *Rhetoric Review*, *22*(4), 396–416.
- Gámez, R., Packard, B. W. L., & Chavous, T. M. (2022). Graduate bridge programs as nepantla for minoritized students in STEM: Navigating challenges with non-bridge peers and faculty. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *15*(1), 37–46. https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000346
- Georgeac, O., & Rattan, A. (2022). Stop making the business case for diversity. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2022/06/stop-making-the-business-case-for-diversity
- Gorski, P. (2019). Avoiding racial equity detours. *Educational Leadership*, *76*(7), 56–61.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2023). *Advancing antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion in STEMM organizations: Beyond broadening participation*. The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/26803
- Phillips, D. J., & Zuckerman, E. W. (2001). Middle-status conformity: Theoretical restatement and empirical demonstration in two markets. *American Journal of Sociology*, *107*(2), 379–429. https://doi.org/10.1086/324072
- Sternberg, R. J., & Williams, W. M. (1997). Does the Graduate Record Examination predict meaningful success in the graduate training of psychologists? A case study. *American Psychologist*, *52*(6), 630.
- W. T. Grant Foundation (n.d.). Research practice partnerships. https://rpp.wtgrantfoundation.org/