Chronicle Staff

College leaders say they want to create equitable and supportive campuses, and many have pledged to confront systemic racism. But what does a diverse, inclusive campus really look like, and how can colleges — even virtually — help foster a sense of belonging?

Earlier this month, The Chronicle convened a virtual event to talk with students, faculty members, and administrators about their experiences, and to explore how colleges can make good on the promise of greater equity and inclusion. Participants included Sonja Ardoin, an assistant professor of student-affairs administration at Appalachian State University; José Fabre Jr., junior recruitment and outreach officer and former student-body president at Wake Technical Community College; John L. Jackson Jr., dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania; Jael Kerandi, student representative to the Board of Regents and former student-body president at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities; and Kathleen Wong(Lau), chief diversity officer at San José State University.

The event was hosted by Michael J. Sorrell, president of Paul Quinn College, and Sarah Brown, a senior reporter at The Chronicle. The event was the final installment of The Chronicle’s 2020 series examining race and class in higher education.

**Michael Sorrell:** I’m going to just throw this out there to everyone: Is inclusion even possible in a country where we no longer speak the same language?

**John L. Jackson Jr.:** What’s the alternative? If the only thing we can foresee is the inevitability of failure, I’m not sure what that means for the future of us as a species. Why would any of the stuff we’re doing right now matter at all? So as difficult as it is, as challenging as it always has been, this is something we have to imagine. The alternative is far too dark.

**Sorrell:** But what if the folks that we are trying to reason with don’t care? What if they would rather burn the house down than share the house?

**Kathleen Wong(Lau):** Many of us are optimists about the tools that we can deploy: teaching people, giving them alternative frameworks, understanding the social psychology — and then building structures. So we’re not relying on the goodwill of people.
Everyone is educable, but we don’t have the right tools in higher ed right now. We don’t have an emancipatory curriculum throughout our institutions. We don’t have the things that would bring people to the table to then be able to go out and spread this way of critical thinking. We need to amplify some of those things — like ethnic studies or women’s studies — that we know actually have a huge impact on our lives, as Asian American studies has had on my life.

**Sonja Ardoin:** I teach a social-justice class, and one of the things we talk about is maintaining critical hope. But to Dr. Wong(Lau)'s points, it’s not just about how we philosophize in the higher-education environment, but: How am I doing with my neighbors? It was obvious to me that my neighbor and I voted differently in the election. Do I completely ignore my neighbor? He stopped me one day. We were having a conversation about golf, which I don’t even play. Then we started talking about police brutality, defunding the police, and all these other things. At the end of that conversation, I thought: We’re less far away than we think we are.

**Sorrell:** Do you think that he believed that you were not as far apart as you might have thought?

**Ardoin:** I honestly think so. As we started breaking down what it meant, he said, I think there need to be social workers who go on these calls. I think there need to be psychologists on these calls. The person I was talking to didn’t have the opportunity go to college. I’m a first-gen student. They are somebody who runs their own business, but didn’t have the opportunity to go to college. As we were talking about it, I thought, We actually agree. We just don’t agree on the terminology. Now if I talked to every other neighbor, are we always going to get to that point? Absolutely not.

**Sarah Brown:** I’d love to hear from the students about what inclusion looks like, what it means. José and Jael, have you felt included on your campus?

**José Fabre Jr.:** Definitely. For me, inclusion is about having the same tools as everyone else. Somebody asked: What if somebody doesn’t want to share the house? Well, I want to make sure that I’m at least giving somebody the tools to make their own house.

Inclusion is about having the same tools as everyone else.

**Jael Kerandi:** To some extent I struggle with the terms *diversity* and *inclusion*. Inclusion always means that someone’s excluded. And our society gets to pick and choose who’s in the circle and who’s out of the circle. Most colleges are predominately white institutions. So that tells you who was meant to be included. On my campus, about 6.3 percent of students are Black. If you want those students to feel supported, if you want to make an “inclusive environment” for that specific community, that has to be concrete. It cannot just be statements. It cannot just be inviting a speaker.
Sorrell: Do you really think institutions want to change? How do you ensure, as students, that the changes you advocate aren’t just made to reduce the pressure of the moment — then we’ll see a regression toward the mean?

Kerandi: Public land-grant universities are serving the state. There is a very defined stakeholder group they are engaging with. The constituencies they have to manage are quite large. I often tell student leaders: Administrators have hundreds of stakeholders, but your job is to advocate for what the students want.

Public land-grant universities are getting two large streams of funding — their state and their students. So if we’re really drawing the trail back to the money, you should be talking to your students. So when we’re talking about holding these administrations accountable, we are simply holding them accountable to something they already said they would do. If your board of regents or your board of trustees has already passed these policies on diversity, equity, inclusion, if your president, if your vice president, if your provost has already made these statements, you get to hold them accountable to that. And I’ve always viewed it that way, because we’re no longer OK with things just being put on a website so that somebody sees them and wants to come to our university. In terms of making changes sustainable, it’s making sure that our asks have very clear timelines and not allowing administrators to wait for the turnover of student leaders.

Jackson Jr.: Institutions can be very open to the idea of folks who look different as long as they act exactly like we do. So as long as you don’t believe something different, come from a different place, have a different set of cultural assumptions, then we can make sense of you. The real issue is when folks bring their differences into that institutional space, because it changes it. That’s the form of difference that becomes really scary to a lot of academic institutions.

Sorrell: Back in the Black-studies period, institutions said, Cool, we’ll bring you in, we’ll give you a place, but we’re not going to hire the person that will agitate to create most sustainable change, because, quite frankly, that person’s annoying. Now we’ve given you what you asked for in theory, but we didn’t give you what you need.

Brown: Dr. Ardoin, you study and work with first-gen, rural communities, low-income students. What do they need from their higher-ed institutions?

Ardoin: I don’t think we can say, if we do these five things then every student who falls into one or more of those kind of populations or identities will be served well. And we also have to think about layered identities. I grew up working class in a rural, predominantly white community in South Louisiana, which is very different than some of my colleagues who also study social class but who grew up in urban environments or indigenous communities.
We don’t like to talk about social class, but we’re doing it more now. I think Covid has pushed us to do that. But it’s still taboo. That has transferred to our campuses. Are we training people to talk about social class? Even the terminology: You said “low income”; I would say “poor and working class.” That is contested. I would argue if we only say “low income” or “low socioeconomic status” or “Pell eligible,” then we’re not understanding social capital, cultural capital, linguistic capital — all these other impacts that social class has on people’s experiences.

I will highlight Dr. Russell Lowery-Hart’s work at Amarillo College, in Texas. They engage students in the process of redefining institutional values. It’s not institutional jargon — it’s words from students about what they want to see their campus do. So listening to people, creating support structures. We can’t purposely recruit students of color, low-income students, rural students, or any other population and then not have the support structures to help them complete. Then we’re creating harm.

**Brown:** José, you’re now in a position where you’re helping to recruit some Latinx students. What do they need from their institutions?

**Fabre Jr.:** You cannot tell me what it is that I need if you don’t know the struggle that I’m going through. Here at Wake Tech, we have a theme called “reaching and rallying.” We reach out to the students, and we rally around what they want.

> We can’t purposely recruit students of color, low-income students, rural students, or any other population and then not have the support structures to help them complete.

At a certain point in my life, guys, all I needed was food. I had food insecurity. I was homeless at a certain point in my college career. Hearing about the resources that the college had to offer helped me out tremendously.

**Sorrell:** Dean, *de cardio* racism — I know I’m not the only person fascinated by this concept. Can you talk a little bit more about it?

**Jackson Jr.:** I was trying to find a term that captured what I thought was at least one version of the post-Civil Rights racial dynamic in America. We know about *de jure* segregation and racism, which is codified in the law. And then there are forms of racial exclusion which, even though they’re not legally enforced, are still manifest in social practice in everyday life — we call this *de facto* racism.

We’re in a moment now where, if nothing else, we have effectively demonized a certain kind of public performance of one’s investment in racism. You could run explicitly as a candidate in the 1960s on a platform of segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever, but you can no longer make that case in the bright light of day. You had to find ways to sublimate.
That gets us into a weird position of trying to figure out if we believe the positive racial language coming out of political figures and others, who we know have to say certain things if they want to keep their job. So we look for these gotcha moments, like when Michael Richards has a meltdown on stage and talked about hanging someone on a noose because they’re heckling him and they happen to be Black. De cardio racism is about the search for a kind of racism hidden in people’s hearts, which, if they think we’re looking, they’re not going to reveal. It’s a way to think about how we’re preoccupied with catching people out in that disconnect between public investments in equality and what we might imagine to be a continued commitment to racial exclusion.

Say what you will about all the important legal changes that we were able to operationalize. We also changed what the public culture would allow in terms of conversation. That does create a kind of backlash, people feeling like there’s a politically correct discourse so that they can’t say what they want to say. Which again, is part of what galvanizes what some people think Trump’s populism represents: Someone willing to say what he means.

**Wong(Lau):** I want to go back to a comment of José’s. One of the things I think that we need to reframe for all of our administrations is when we’re talking about communities that are not applying to our schools or are not coming to our institutions, sometimes we use the deficit model — we say, What do we need to do to those communities in order to make them come to our campus? Do we need to change their culture and their values?

Part of our work is to reframe: To say, What do we need to do so that people can entrust their children and their families to come to school at our institutions?

Part of our work is to reframe: To say, What do we need to do so that people can entrust their children and their families to come to school at our institutions? We have first-gen students who have family members who have attempted going to college or have partially and had really negative experiences. Those are the legacies that we have to prove over and over again to communities that we are changing. We’re underserving a lot of communities who could be on our campuses.

**Kerandi:** What connections do our universities have with our local public-school boards? When we look at the K-12 system, those primary years are when we should be influencing students. It’s not when they start ACT and SAT prep. If universities want to see this exponential success, especially if they’re public land grants, and so land of the state, much of that work has to happen in K-12 in their local communities. We can’t wait until they’re 16, 17, and 18 to then say, Now I’m here for you.

**Ardoin:** I’ve done some research around high-school counselors and college access for minoritized populations of students. And they don’t get the same information as the college counselor at the private elite high school who has been curating somebody’s experience to get them admitted to X, Y, Z school. There are campuses who don’t send admissions counselors
to certain high schools. Because they say, Well, the rate of return’s not great. That shows me you don’t care about the things that you’ve put in your mission statement or your diversity, equity, and inclusion statement.

**Brown:** Dr. Jackson, how can leaders step up and effect some of the change we’ve been discussing?

**Jackson Jr.:** I start with one basic premise, which is that I know for me to be successful, the students who come to this school have to feel like they’re getting the support they need. The faculty also have to be able to get support in a way that allows them to continue to do their research. And actually, honestly, the staff who supplies all of that support also needs their own support. And so your job is about what do folks need, how do you give it to them. And then when you can’t do it, one of the toughest things is to say, We can’t pull this off right now.

**Brown:** How can colleges do this work in a tough economic and financial climate?

**Wong(Lau):** One of the things that needs to happen at the cabinet level is the prioritizing of the budget so that it’s not just something that the CFO does, or that the president does.

The thing that you can do is really try to invest in building organizational capacity for the work. That’s something that faculty members can do, and certainly an office of equity can do as well. Really utilizing the expertise that’s on your campus. And really trying to get people to prepare themselves for the hard work of addressing issues in the room. If we hire people from outside to do the work, they’re here and they’re gone, and they cost a lot of money. But if you build that expertise among your own staff, it’s cheaper to send people right now to virtual webinars, to join working groups so they can learn about these issues.

**Sorrell:** I’m going to put on my HBCU hat for a moment. Our institutions have historically done a lot without the resources to do it. And it has just been extraordinary to listen to relatively well-funded institutions talk about how they can’t afford to do stuff.

**Ardoin:** I would say community colleges, too, have always done this work. And so in some ways, four-year institutions should be looking at our colleagues at two-year institutions and say, Hey, tell us. Help us, inform us, and let us learn from you. But I think sometimes our ego gets in the way that.

**Sorrell:** The ego is completely in the way, right? And that’s the problem. The data is clear. The majority of these students in the public educational system are from low-income backgrounds. It’s a very frustrating moment to listen to people talk about what they can’t afford to do — and yet the students keep coming to them.

**Kerandi:** Students are still paying tuition. In fact, some students, their tuition has gone up. Where is that money going?
Sorrell: Which is unconscionable. It’s unconscionable that you raise tuition rates during this moment.

Kerandi: Exactly. And then we’re told that that money isn’t there to support students, right? But our police budgets are increasing.

This excerpt has been edited for length and clarity.