

advancing equity: navigating new terrain

► embracing catalytic events for change



October 2021

Lead Authors:
Jeff Smith, Jacen Greene, and Juan Barraza



about VentureWell



At VentureWell, we envision a world in which science and technology innovators have the support, training, and access to networks and resources they need to solve the world's most difficult problems. We foster collaboration among the best minds from research labs, classrooms, and beyond to advance innovation and entrepreneurship education and to provide unique opportunities for STEM students and researchers to fully realize their potential to improve the world.

Since our founding in 1995, we've supported more than 12,000 early-stage innovators and helped launch over 2,300 ventures that have raised \$1.8 billion in funding. These ventures have reached millions of people in over 50 countries with technological advancements in fields such as biotechnology, healthcare, sustainable energy and materials, and solutions for low-resource settings.

We are proud that leading institutions, from foundations to government agencies to major businesses, support our mission to transform higher education and technology entrepreneurship. The Lemelson Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, National Science Foundation (NSF), National Institutes of Health (NIH), and USAID are among those who recognize ours as a powerful model for supporting emerging STEM innovators and the entrepreneurship ecosystems that are critical to their success.

authors

Jeff Smith, Director of Innovation and Equity at the National Association for Community College Entrepreneurship (NACCE)

Jacen Greene, Assistant Director, Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative at Portland State University

Juan Barraza, Director of Student Innovation at Portland State University's Center for Entrepreneurship



about the series

Creating physical or virtual spaces, programs, and courses that welcome a diversity of perspectives, backgrounds, and approaches is critical for excellence in innovation and entrepreneurship (I&E). As many higher education institutions, entrepreneurship centers, and funders affirm, renew, or expand their commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), they are eager for strategies and solutions to advance DEI in their work.

In July 2020, VentureWell published the findings of a national study of promising practices we commissioned, which identified six interrelated action areas for advancing equity in higher education STEM I&E. We presented these in our report, ***Advancing Equity: Dynamic Strategies for Authentic Engagement in Innovation and Entrepreneurship***, as a widely applicable blueprint for university-based entrepreneurship centers and programs that strive to broaden access pathways for early-stage innovators. Since then, we engaged I&E faculty and center directors in discussions of their experiences testing and implementing strategies and solutions on their campuses through a series of community conversations, facilitated by experts from the field. After these lively and compelling virtual discussions, we invited several presenters to form teams and to dig a little deeper into one or more action areas to develop resources for the field.

We are pleased to share the results of their work through our new series called **Advancing Equity: Navigating New Terrain**. The series includes:

- a presentation of two assessment tools designed to facilitate deep and thoughtful conversations among staff about how to integrate ongoing DEI practices and learnings into programmatic work;
- three personal narratives centered on catalytic events that propelled each author into deeper, more authentic personal and professional engagement around DEI;
- a creative illustration of multiple pathways to success in entrepreneurship, to represent and support student innovators from a broader range of backgrounds, interests, and lived experiences.

We invite you to adapt or adopt these resources to advance DEI in your campus and community, and share back with us what you are testing and learning.

*This series is made possible through the support of **The Lemelson Foundation**, our long-term partner in cultivating and supporting student inventors in higher education, with a shared commitment to advance equity in science and technology innovation and entrepreneurship.*

introduction

Within the field of higher education, we naturally find ourselves drawn to and reliant upon intellectual, academic resources and research to help us solve complex problems. However, when confronting deeply entrenched barriers within pervasive structures and systems such as white supremacy and racism, we are called upon to bring our whole selves—emotional, physical, spiritual, *and* intellectual—to the table in order to make lasting change. This may require us to shift to a more personal, transparent, and vulnerable stance. What might inspire us to take that risk?

Here, three of our colleagues generously share what moved them towards a place of greater risk and discomfort—for each, a catalytic event that touched them so viscerally that it propelled them into deeper, more authentic engagement around diversity, equity, and inclusion with their colleagues, their students, and themselves. They describe specific examples of strategies which led to progress in their classrooms and institutions. The authors explore the conditions and personal motivations that transformed them. Our hope is that their honest accounts will galvanize others to embrace their own emotional core, to reflect more deeply and honestly, and to pursue opportunities to engage in more authentic collaboration to advance DEI.

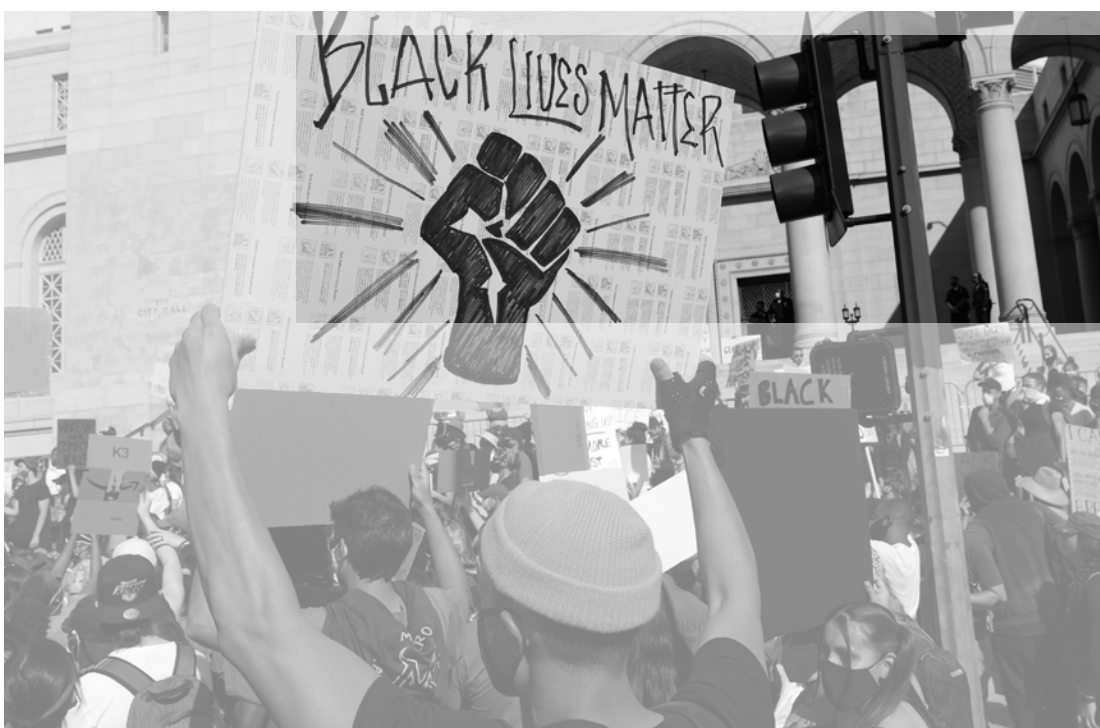


Photo: Mike Von



diverse ways of knowing: Jeff Smith

Viewing the murder of George Floyd brought tremendous pain to many communities. For me, as an African American man living in the South, **the pain had been building and growing** each time I learned the name of a Black person who had been murdered in the years, months, and days leading up to George Floyd's death. I knew that each person had a story, a family, dreams, and a life that mattered. The deep division in our nation that characterized this time contributed to the mental and emotional turmoil that I felt. The fact that we were also in the middle of a health crisis contributed to how I experienced these intense emotions. Each of these tragic events created **a need for me to bring my whole self—emotionally, socially, spiritually, and culturally—to the table** in order to adequately engage with everything happening around me.

I am fortunate to work for the National Association for Community College Entrepreneurship (NACCE), an organization with a compassionate leader who created the space for me to do that. Following the murder of George Floyd, I became more intentional and vulnerable in my conversations with my colleagues about how these cumulative murders impacted my very being. Given their openness and responsiveness, we were able to move forward to reconsider how we showed up for each other and how we did our work.

During the last few years, I have often felt that I am standing in a dark cave with my natural capacity to see, hear, and perceive impeded. I still feel exhausted when trying to find the words to describe **the profound emotional and spiritual journey** that I have been propelled into since viewing George Floyd's murder and the resulting trial that affirmed that his life mattered. However, I have experienced this moment in time as catalytic and transformative: my eyes see in a new way, my ears hear differently, and my heart perceives with a greater sense of clarity. While the journey has been wrought with agony, confusion, frustration, hope, and joy, ultimately it has been a completely transformative spiritual experience.

Spirituality, for me, is about awareness—honoring wholeness and the interconnectedness of all things. As a journey, spirituality is about reconnecting to oneself, to others, to the environment, and to the mystery of what many refer to as the Life-force, God, or cosmic energy. The ability to draw upon a higher source has **allowed me to regain and sustain hope**. This practice has allowed my spiritual self and my authentic voice to emerge. The ways in which my colleagues have created space for me to lead using the language of spirituality with a focus on healing has allowed me to embrace this moment in ways that were not possible before.



As we continue to acknowledge and experience the realities of racism that devastate our individual and collective well-being, **infusing spirituality and other culturally relevant, diverse ways of knowing** into our lives and work may help us come up with meaningful pathways forward.

Journaling, contemplation, and meditation are spiritual practices that have helped me to pursue connection, practice empathy, and ignite my imagination. For me, these spiritual practices foster innovation. They encourage us to connect with one another in new ways, generating fresh ideas, insights, and approaches that are potentially more inclusive and equitable.

My hope is that the visceral, collective pain that many of us felt through viewing the murder of George Floyd will lead us into a collective lament. Lament is a spiritual practice that allows individuals and groups to express a response to death, brokenness, or despair, and **connects us to our humanness and our desire for wholeness**. Lament tells the truth of the suffering that challenges our worthiness and silences our dreams. The practice of lament has allowed me to better understand my pain, connect to the pain of others, and embrace my responsibility to pursue my own healing while also helping others heal. Lament can move us from an expression of pain into a celebration of life, and beyond that, into visions and strategies about how to move forward.

Spirituality also provides the language for human connectedness that is needed in our community and the world. It has allowed my colleagues and me to move beyond intellectual dithering toward true embodiment.

We feel it in our bones—like a fire moving us into action. We have used it to collectively build innovative, inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems that promote racial and ethnic healing, community health, and economic vitality. Using a spiritual lens to build empathy shaped our overall approach, influencing how we discuss, envision, and frame our equity work. Embracing the entrepreneurial mindset, we understand that it is our responsibility to serve our fellow human beings. Our communities need all kinds of entrepreneurs, including social and civic entrepreneurs, to address the most critical issues of our day.



Jeff Smith

Specifically, the concepts of growth mindset and problem-solving give us the tools needed to help us sustain hope and to change the things within ourselves and our organizations that hinder our growth. At NACCE, we challenged ourselves to dream a big, bold vision about how we could make an impact on racial equity issues, and even re-imagined our mission and our metrics of success. **The language of spirituality** allowed us to acknowledge the need for racial and ethnic healing; the practice of making and entrepreneurship allowed us to tap into the creativity we need to do the work of building our way forward. The combination allowed us to bring our authentic selves into our ongoing dialogue and work, opening our eyes, ears, and hearts to the full humanity and potential of ourselves, our colleagues and partners, and all of the student innovators we hope to nurture and inspire.



moving through grief: Jacen Greene

I identify as a white, able-bodied, cisgender, heterosexual man who speaks English as a first language—one of the most privileged people in the world. I’ve certainly faced hardship and barriers, but they were reduced, not imposed, based on my identity and how other people perceived me. I have received opportunities again and again that simply did not exist for others. I have complicated feelings about this, but once I realized it, I gained a greater sense of clarity than I had before. The way I perceive and engage with the world around me changed for the better; and it requires constant attention and an awareness of intention. As imperfect as this transformation has been so far, it has had a profound impact on how I teach and how I engage in innovation and entrepreneurship. **My journey started with a catalyzing moment that changed how I saw the world.**

After Michael Brown’s murder by police in August of 2014, and the Ferguson, Missouri protests that followed, I began reading everything I could find on the prevalence of police violence against people of color. What I learned after emerging from my cocoon of white privilege was the shocking frequency of police murders and violence—not just a few “bad apples,” but actions widespread across the nation. The statistics made clear that these were actions that **disproportionately targeted people of color, especially Black and Brown men**, beyond what any explanation could support except one: systemic racism. Despite what I had been told and what I chose to believe growing up, racism clearly remains pervasive throughout our society.

Racism isn’t limited to policing; it poisons business, nonprofits, and academia—all spheres in which I operate. And this means that if I do not take action in addressing racism in myself, my family, my work, and my community, I am complicit in perpetuating it.

At the same time that I began to engage intellectually, trying to understand the scale of the issue and my role in it, I felt that I also needed to engage emotionally. I don’t understand what it would be like to fear for my life, or the lives of my family members, when around the police, but I knew that looking at statistics alone diminished the trauma and reality of what many people of color experience. So I started watching police and bystander videos of these murders. I felt rage at the ways in which what was self-evident on film had been distorted, omitted, or outright lied about in police reports and media. But **most of all, I felt grief**, something that my family, community, and colleagues had always taught me not to feel or express throughout my life. I cried, over and over. The profound grief and horror I felt changed how I related to these issues and gave me a sense of urgency and determination.



I understand that, because of my identity and life experiences, I will never truly “get it”—but I can always work to improve my understanding and actions. I see this as a lifelong effort to make progress, in myself and in the organizations and communities in which I participate. At first, I was afraid to speak up, worried I would say the wrong thing and cause more harm than good. But in time I learned to value these moments, and **to be grateful to anyone who took the time to point out my mistakes**, because they led me to further growth and understanding. I know that I have and will continue to make mistakes or even backslide, but knowing that I will always be working on this means I always have a chance to do better.

I also recognize that change should have happened already, and needs to be happening, right now. There’s no time to wait. I was reading books and articles on racism, attending trainings and workshops, talking to my family about these issues, and joining protests, but there was more I needed to do. The good news was that I didn’t need to have the answers; on the contrary, I just needed to begin asking better questions, and **listening to my students, friends, family, and colleagues who were most directly impacted by racism** and discrimination.

In the entrepreneurship classes I taught and the programs I managed, I used multiple methods to gather student feedback and input on inclusion, diversity, and representation. I hired consultants to provide recommendations. I reviewed every article, book, guest speaker, video, and assignment to find ways to bring more representation of different perspectives and identities into my courses and programs, and found that **I ended up with better material than before**. I attended trainings in inclusive pedagogy, and began to address issues of equity and racism in the classroom, linking them explicitly to course material. Our department changed who served as mentors, judges, and instructors in the programs. We saw improvements in the diversity of our students, their reported feelings of inclusion and representation, and even in their engagement and academic success.



Jacen Greene

I also began to open up about my own experience of childhood poverty, and how that affected my career and worldview, and to encourage my students to reflect on and incorporate their identity and lived experience—when they felt safe doing so—into their assignments and coursework. Although this work can never be complete or finished, I saw a change in myself and my students. As I felt happier and more present, I built stronger connections with students, and they in turn began to thrive academically and emotionally in a way I had never seen before. Nothing I did was radical or inventive—like a good entrepreneur, I was really just listening to what people said they wanted and needed—but finding an emotional connection to that work drives my ongoing commitment. For me, **that emotional connection is grief, expressed privately or increasingly in communion with others**. Grief brings perspective to my own feelings of discomfort or fear of failure and provides a motivating force that is difficult to forget or ignore.

I wouldn’t call this advice, but my wish for other white people, especially white men who are seeking ways into this work, would be to **find and explore your own emotional link**. I found guidance by embracing, rather than avoiding, an emotion I had been taught to fear. I hope that you will be able to do the same, in whatever way works for you.

the power of visibility: Juan Barraza

Frequently we hear people saying, “**You can’t be what you can’t see.**” During my school years and professional life, I have been fortunate to encounter mentors and role models who looked like me, shared my background, and understood my cultural nuances and way of thinking.

I realize that is my privilege. I grew up in Mexico, and I know that many Latinx students in America don’t have the opportunity to have role models who look like them. If that’s not enough, they are constantly faced with negative stereotypes of them portrayed in the media. I was propelled forward during the early days of the past federal administration, when members of the Latinx community were pegged as “bad hombres,” and there was an orchestrated effort to reverse the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) policy and to separate families seeking asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border. These actions put on hold the futures of 600,000 Latinx young adults brought to the United States as children, as well as the futures of the more than 500,000 kids who were cruelly separated from their families at the border and confined in cages. **Just like that, years of contributions by the Latinx community were erased** and one more barrier was created for us to overcome to be seen and valued. I needed to take action and to inspire others to join me in supporting our Latinx students, colleagues, friends, neighbors, and families.

People often don’t understand that the Latinx community is not a monolith; we are an amalgamation of **rich cultures, traditions, and points of view shaped from all parts of the American continent**. While many Latinx are first- and second-generation Americans, many others have been here for generations, and can trace their roots back well before the birth of the United States. Frequently, I get asked what we can do to reach out and engage this diverse Latinx community. The answer is simple, but it requires work.

It is about building relationships; it is about stepping away from your comfort zone and introducing yourselves to the community; it is about listening, learning, and exploring where people are coming from, their traditions, and their aspirations.

It is about being intentional, showing up, and committing to do the work. This work will not be easy or comfortable. You will need to make a commitment to stepping into that discomfort and getting comfortable with being uncomfortable every single day. Because **what matters most is the work of dismantling racism**. And though there is no end in sight, we must work together throughout our lifetimes to achieve racial equity.



Each person on this journey must recognize that **the first step begins with listening to different voices with different lived experiences**. For me, that meant focusing on leveling the playing field for Latinx students by creating an environment where they can explore potential career paths while surrounded by mentors and resources to guide them on their journey to attain their college degree. I also focus on connecting them with our larger community outside of school to start developing meaningful connections with additional role models and sources of inspiration.

This work has meant meeting students where they are, and making space for them to open up and share the things that are holding them back. It has meant being there for our DACA students when their hopes and dreams came crumbling down with **the constant threat of being asked to “go back” to a home country that is unfamiliar to them**. It has meant being there for students when their parents got deported, and they were left behind as the head of household looking after younger siblings. It has meant being there for students forced to change their name from Miguel to Michael to improve their chances of getting hired. It has meant being there for students who got their dream job only to realize that the company culture wasn’t set up for them to succeed.

One in four students entering K-12 schools is Latinx; **these students will become our next generation of teachers, scientists, engineers, and entrepreneurs**. They will be our neighbors, co-workers, partners, and leaders. They are asking to be seen as a critical and valuable part of our society, economy, culture, and traditions.

That is the work. It’s simple: we must be intentional and let the next generation of Latinx students know that **we see them and value them for who they are**.



Juan Barraza

closing

We hope you find these stories to be illustrative, moving, and inspiring. We encourage you to identify your own catalytic moments or emotional, physical, spiritual, and intellectual connections that motivate you to embark on and/or sustain your DEI journey. We would love to hear your thoughts on these narratives as well as your own stories. Please share your feedback, questions, insights, and experiences by reaching out to Kristen Golden and Shaheen Mamawala at equity@venturewell.org.

For more resources, please visit VentureWell’s [Advancing Equity page](#).

