

# CONNECTING EQUITABLE ACCESS & INCLUSIVE CLIMATE

## THE POWER OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE & LEARNING

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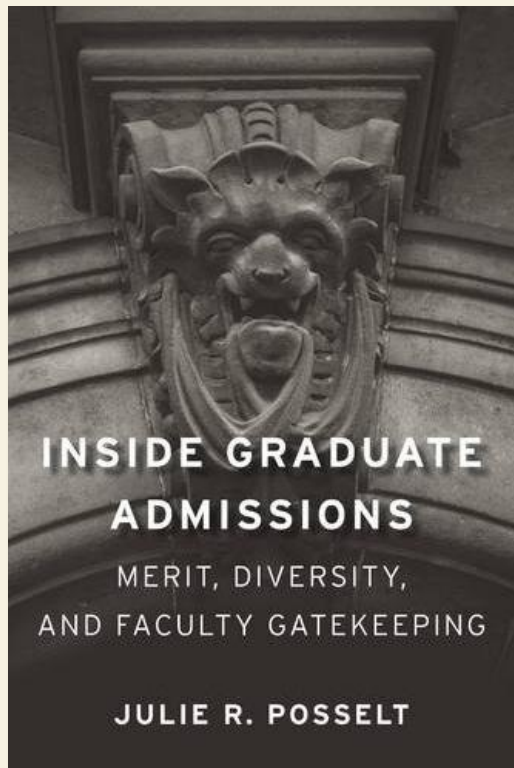
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Director, Equity in Graduate Education Consortium;  
Executive Director, USC Center for Enrollment  
Research, Policy, & Practice



**The mindsets about merit that drive evaluation & selection practices, which determine access, are by definition exclusive, not inclusive.**

**Organizational climate & culture reflect and reinforce these mindsets, reproducing inequities.**

# Evaluative cultures explain tensions between definitions of merit & valuing diversity

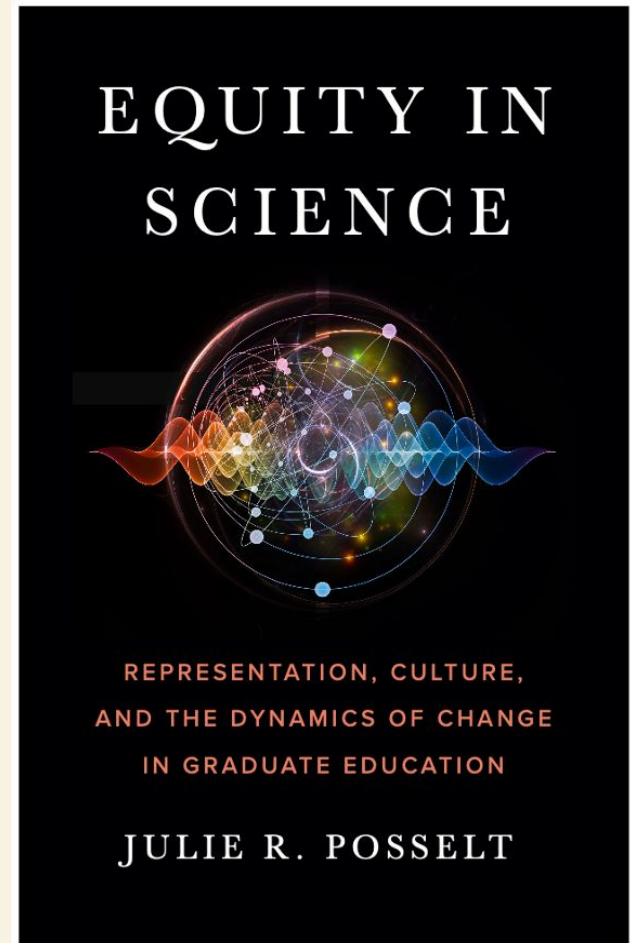


- *Preferences for specific criteria* were rooted in beliefs about what they signal. Those beliefs were tightly linked to their identities as scholars in highly ranked programs.
- *Preference for applicants with training their programs exist to provide* (i.e., who would require less mentoring).
- *Preference for a process that is convenient and collegial.* They wanted to quantify quality & minimize conflict.
- Four clear patterns of *homophily* (pedigree, cool, social mobility, international).
- They defended potentially controversial decisions to themselves and one another using *disciplinary logics*.
- *Ambivalence about organizational change*, especially changes related to diversity and equity.

Across the STEM ecosystem, people tell themselves common stories about what is necessary for excellence.

These stories are described by social scientists as *scripts*.

They are often deployed by well-meaning professionals, to justify actions that reproduce inequalities.



# Scripts that uphold the STEM Status Quo

**Excellence is exclusive:** Rigid gatekeeping requirements are necessary to reduce perceived risks (O'Meara et al., 2023) and to get the “best of the best” (Lamont, 2009).

**Sink or swim:** It's every person for themselves in navigating the system. Challenge is good, support is for the weak (Posselt & Nuñez, 2022).

**Publish or perish:** There is no place for you in academia if you do not prioritize productivity over all (Blair-Loy & Cech, 2022).

**Quick fixes** are the best solutions. They should be implemented with the consistency of an experimental condition (Darcy & Henderson, 2008; Perez et al., 2023).

**Race evasive by design:** Scientists are objective, and race is political. Therefore, racism is not our business (King et al., 2023; Haynes & Patton, 2019).

Like culture itself, mindsets about merit & worth tend to be inherited and stable.  
And stories take on a life of their own.

However, they are socially constructed, which means they can also be reconstructed.

***We write the stories & set the norms*** that the next generation is picking up as their own.

***Exogenous shocks*** can compel transformational changes that colleges, universities, and their members otherwise resist.

To embed such changes requires ***organizational learning***.

# TODAY: What leaders can do to connect access & climate

## BROADEN MERIT VIA HOLISTIC REVIEW

Learn from students as part of transforming conceptions of “status quo excellence”

## MAKE CHANGE PART OF THE CULTURE

Embed change leadership in the chair role. Lead your community into a virtuous cycle of organizational learning.

## BROADEN TRUST NETWORKS

Unlearn elitist impulses. Learn to recognize potential, not just achievements.

## REWRITE DISCIPLINARY SCRIPTS

Unlearn preferences for incremental change & quick fixes. Remember other worlds are possible.

# BROADEN MERIT VIA HOLISTIC REVIEW

Aguilar, J., Posselt, J., Anglon, G., & Lue, K.  
(2023). Styles of race-neutral holistic  
review. *Association for the Study of  
Higher Education*. Minneapolis, MN

# HOLISTIC REVIEW IN A NUTSHELL

## Definition:

Assessment of “academic ability coupled with a flexible assessment of applicants’ talents, experiences, and potential to contribute to the learning of those around them,” by evaluating “all of the information available in their file” (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 539 U.S. 315, 2003)

## Review is:

- Comprehensive
- Contextualized
- Systematic
- Equity-Minded

## Advantages:

- Looks beyond academic metrics with known disparities (Bastedo et al., 2018)
- Aligns standards of quality with social commitments (Garces, 2014)
- Assesses socio-emotional qualities that affect professional success & organizational health (Barcelo, et al., 2021)
- Opens the opportunity structure in the next phase of review (Grabowski, 2017; Syverson et al., 2018)

## Questions & Tensions:

- What counts? According to whom?
- Does it work? By what (and whose) standards?
- Place & role of tests?
- Risk of symbolic adoption in a decentralized system

# CONTEXT: PHYSICAL SCIENCES PH.D. PROGRAM UNDER A STATE-LEVEL POLICY ON AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

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## WESTERN UNIVERSITY

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|                                   |                                                                           |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>STATUS</b>                     | Elite;<br>Highly selective                                                |
| <b>COMMITTEE &amp; LEADERSHIP</b> | 5 Faculty + 3 Students;<br>2 Experienced Co-Chairs                        |
| <b>KNOWLEDGE OF LAW</b>           | Variable within committee;<br>Doing all possible within boundaries of law |
| <b>DIVERSITY COMMITMENT</b>       | Explicit; Racism & power- conscious;<br>Diversity often discussed         |

# FINDINGS: CHALLENGING *STATUS QUO* SCRIPTS OF EXCELLENCE

**“We are trying to emancipate the ideas of success tied down to the status quo.”—Co-Chair**

**“Sometimes status quo does not make it up the list.”—Co-Chair**

**“If you look at our pool, almost a third, if not a little bit more, have a first-authored paper. So that, of course, carries a huge amount of weight, but **one thing to think about is privilege is assigned to whether or not you have the opportunity to do research...** In at least a third of the cases, there was a lot of discussion about that.”—Co-Chair**

# FINDINGS: GRADUATE STUDENTS LEAD BY CENTERING COMMUNITY

## Comments in committee deliberations:

“Does this person **value having a community?**’ And I felt they would do things in the department to **foster bonding.**”—*Grad Student*

“...She has been a leader in the SPS and instrumental in creating positive change. One of the letters mentioned that **during the pandemic, she made sure to have events and create a loving community among undergrads.** Great all around. I don’t know about publications.”—*Grad Student*

## Reflections by faculty in interviews:

“[Students asking] **What do you plan to bring to our department? or what do you hope to find in our community?**... really changed the conversation about some of the attributes that we were looking for in students – in terms of **building community and amplifying community we already have.**” —*Co-Chair*

# FINDINGS: INHABITING AN INCLUSIVE DEPARTMENTAL CULTURE

## Leaders amplified student voices:

Co-chair, in committee, to grad student: ***"We can elevate your voice."***

## Leaders exemplified courtesy & care in interactions:

Co-Chair: ***"I'm sorry I cut you off,"***

Grad student: "Mexican and white, she is a second author on a published paper, good letters from people in the field. . "

## The group accepted discomfort to protect candor:

Asst. Professor: "What do I share about a student with only two minutes [to speak]?"

Co-Chair: "a decent likelihood of accepting our offer."

Asst. Professor: "I'm not sure how to evaluate from an application if someone is likely to come! ***I feel uncomfortable doing that.***"

# BROADEN TRUST NETWORKS

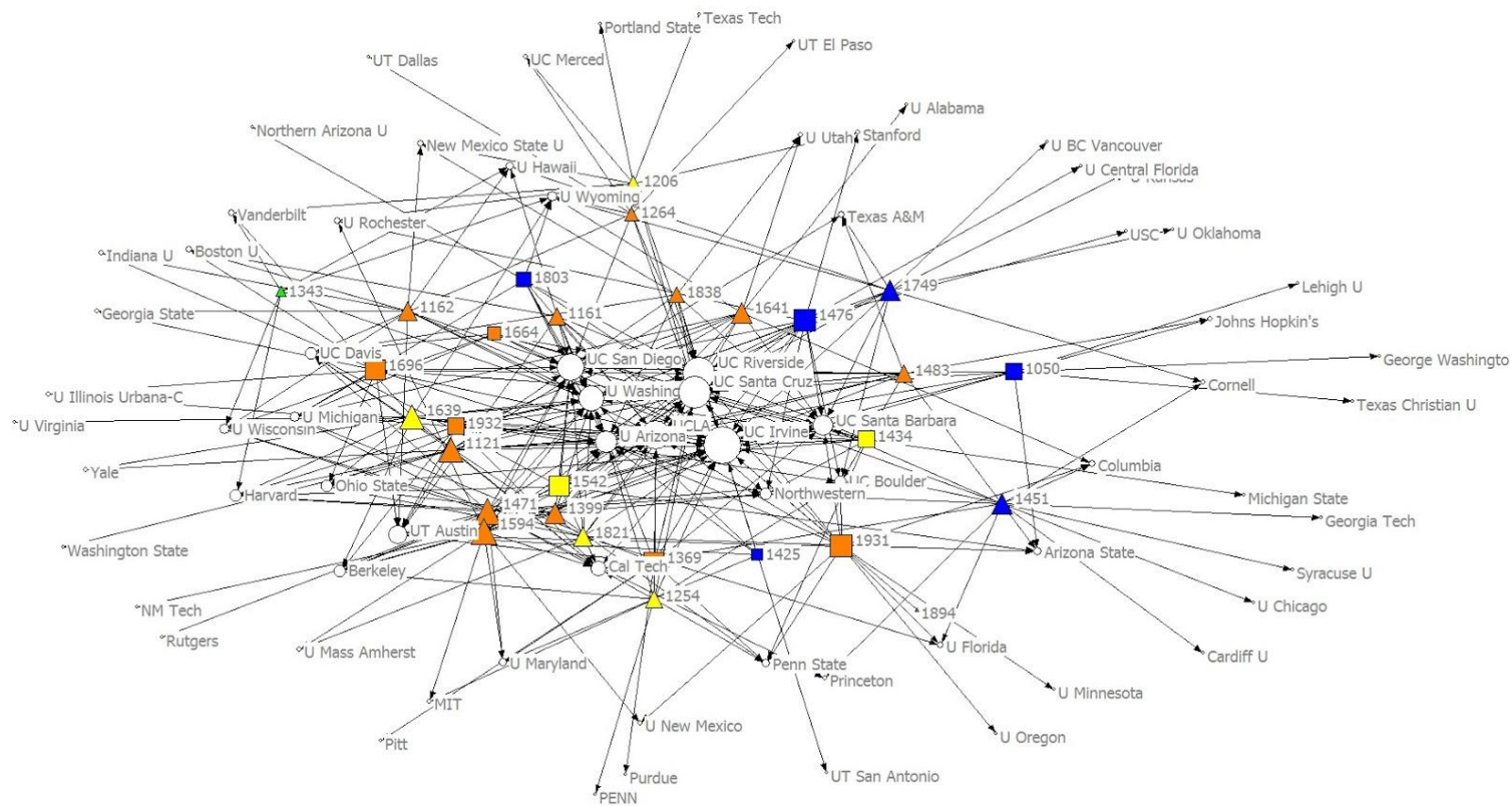


Villarreal, C., Posselt, J., Hernandez, T., & Rudolph, A.. (2024). Bridging the gap: A sequential mixed methods study of trust networks in graduate application, admissions, and enrollment. *J. of Women & Minorities in Science & Engineering* 30.



# DEFINITION: Trust networks

- **Definition:** Interpersonal relationships among individuals and organizations create networks of trust that affect gatekeeping outcomes (Posselt, 2018).
- The need for trust in an applicant is directly tied to the tacit understanding **that each student is a potential investment**.
  - Each carries a profile of **financial and reputational risk** for the department, and may **affect the productivity of the students' advisor** to an unknown degree (Klitgaard, 1985).
- **Pedigree** is a key determinant of whom faculty trust (Paxton & Bollen, 2003)
  - It includes both brand-recognition and the reputation of letter writers (Posselt, 2016).
  - Default instincts about who constitutes a risk, and who can be trusted, reflect biases against less selective institutions.

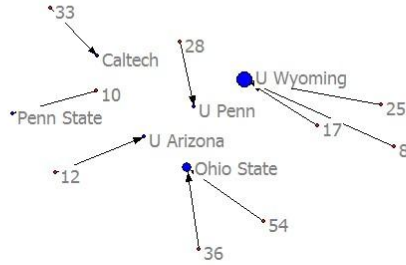


Network of Applications for one cohort (N=29; Square & Triangle= Male & Female; Colors= Race/Ethnicity)

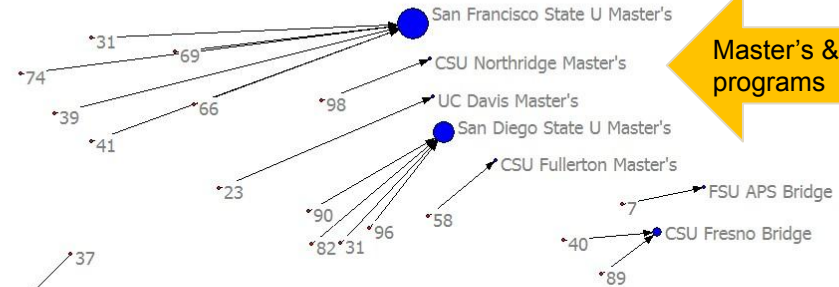
# Where Cal-Bridge Scholars have enrolled since 2015:

Fisk-Vanderbilt PhD Bridge Program  
14 26 80

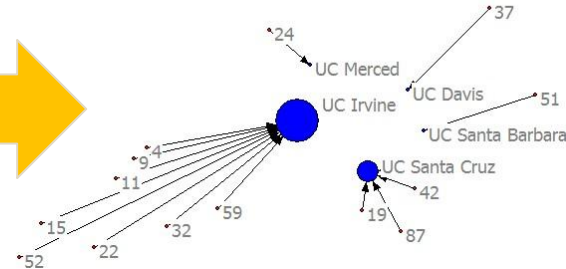
Cal-Bridge  
Partners



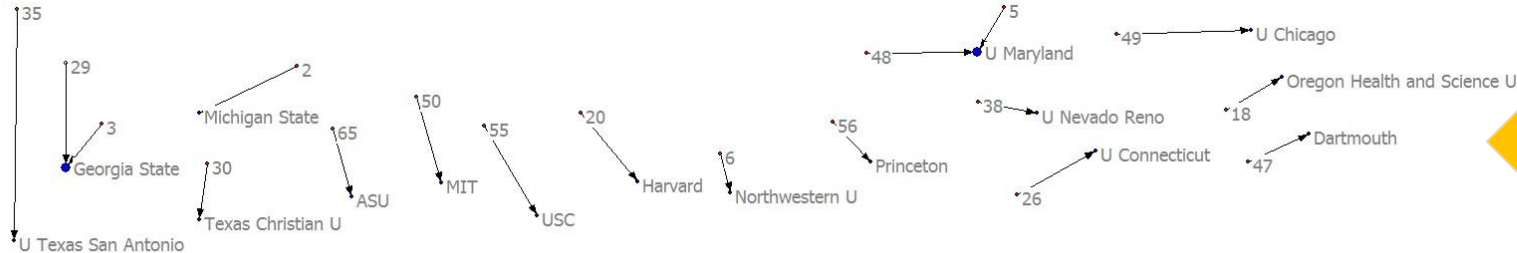
Master's & Bridge  
programs



UC campuses



Other  
universities



Network of Enrollments for seven cohorts (Each number corresponds to one student)

# CONTEXT: UC-Irvine Physics and Astronomy

Admitted and enrolled the most Cal-Bridge students

Leaders encouraged intentional, institutional change at multiple organizational levels, which led to positive admission and enrollment outcomes.

Change efforts complemented Cal-Bridge activities, creating conditions that cultivated trust between bridge scholars and their faculty advisors and mentors. It affected:

**Admissions:** Faculty learned to trust new profiles of applicants as Cal-Bridge alumni were successful in their PhD program.

**Recruitment:** Students developed trust in the program and prospective advisors, as Cal-Bridge alumni (now PhD students) could vouch for the program.

# MAKE CHANGE PART OF THE CULTURE



Posselt, J., Porter, K. B., & Kamimura, A. (2018). Organizational pathways toward gender equity in doctoral education: Chemistry and civil engineering compared. *American Journal of Education*, 124(4), 383-410.



# CONTEXT: A CHEMISTRY DEPARTMENT IN DECLINE

- ***“Head-hanging embarrassment”***: Department ranking sank amid failed tenure cases for women
- ***Introspection & groundswell for change***: “This isn’t who we are.” “Or is it?”
- ***A step back***: Coordination with the ADVANCE program for data-driven inquiry.
- ***Systematic change effort***: Changed evaluation & hiring practices
- ***“Watershed moment”***: hiring “the top candidate in the country her year, of any chemist.”
- ***Shift in morale***: Optimism & development of a critical mass of new women faculty.

**"Critical mass went a long way to organically attracting women PhD students...."**

**The department became known for being "friendlier to women, particularly in certain areas like organic synthesis which is typically really macho."**

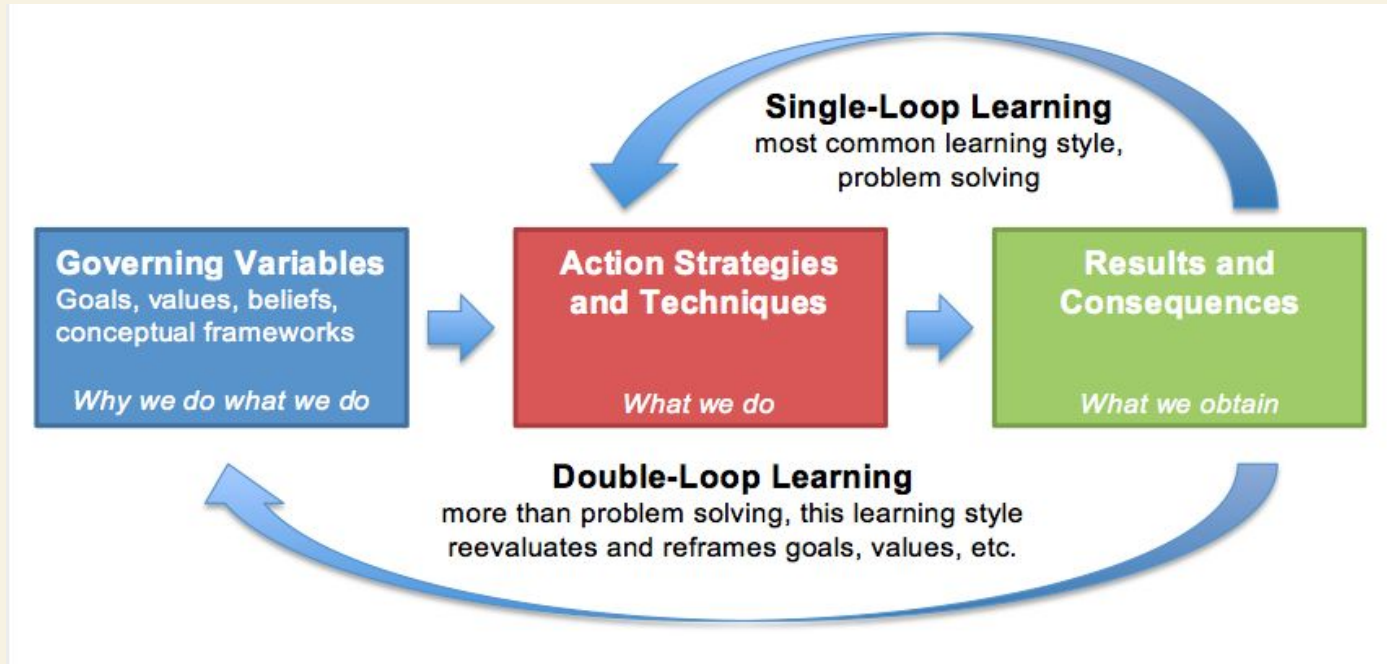
Questioning their goals, values, & strategies enabled recognition that they'd been short-sighted.

For example: Hiring women as "diversity hiring" vs. Hiring women in the intellectual core of the department.

Attention to experiences and "small cues" sent in recruitment and within lab life.

Improving policies, representation, and the climate for women faculty made it natural to take on the improvement of access and climate for graduate students.

Now, they are taking on institutionalized racism. They are more confident and skilled in addressing racial inequities in *both* the faculty and student populations.



# REWRITE DISCIPLINARY SCRIPTS



Posselt, J. (2024). Transforming the culture  
of marine biology, one diver at a time.  
Invited seminar, *Monterey Bay Aquarium  
and Research Institute*.



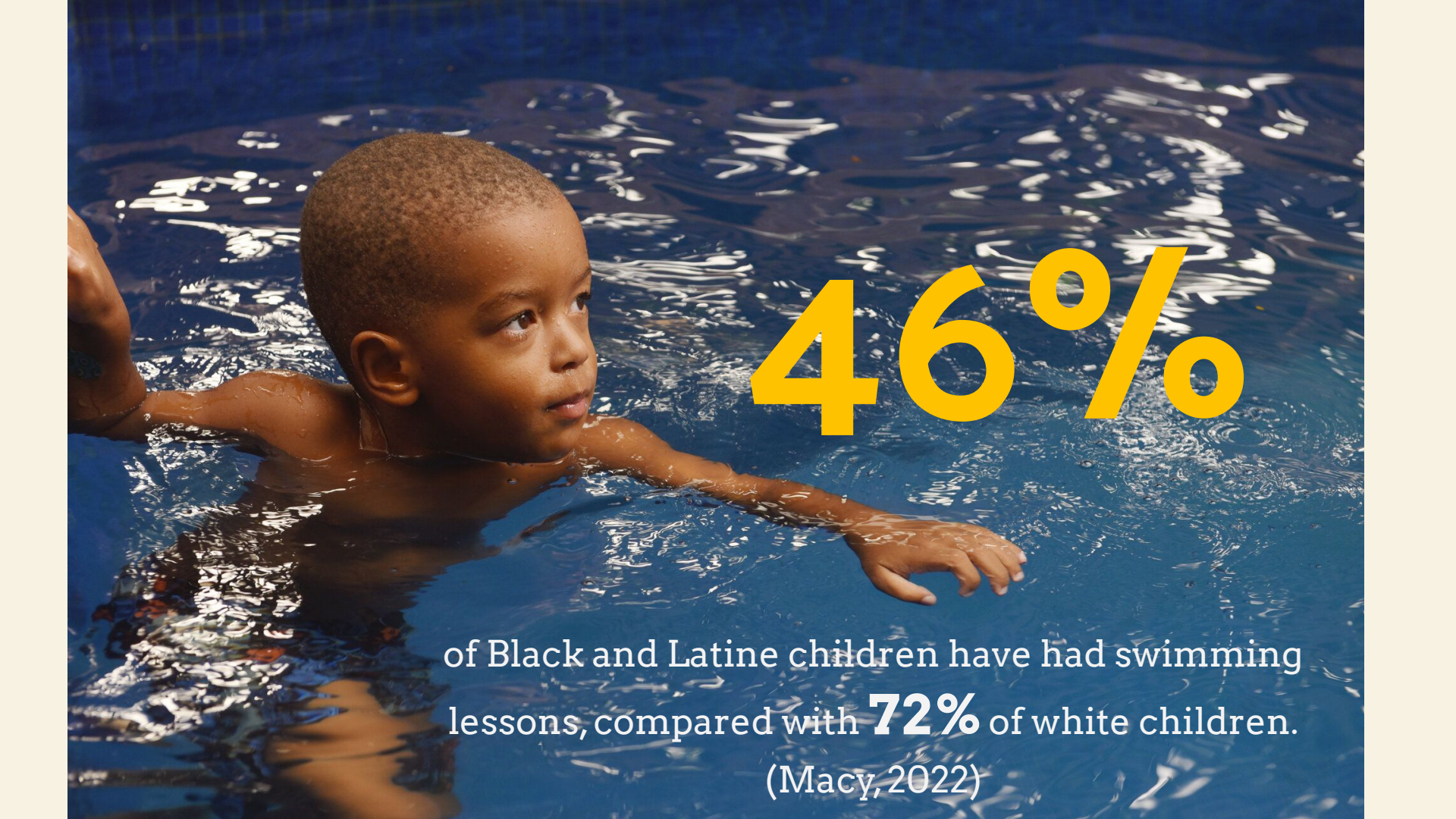
# CONTEXT: THE DIVERSITY PROJECT AT UCLA ECOLOGY & EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY

The Diversity Project

[About](#)[Faculty](#)[Alumni](#)[Field Videos](#)[Gallery](#)[FAQs](#)[Other Programs](#)

## THE DIVERSITY PROJECT

**Anyone** can become a scientist—anyone can become a marine scientist. Marine environments are threatened worldwide, and the conservation and sustainability of these valuable ecosystems will

A young Black child is swimming in a pool, looking towards the right. The water is blue with ripples. The text '46%' is overlaid in large yellow font.

# 46%

of Black and Latine children have had swimming lessons, compared with **72%** of white children.  
(Macy, 2022)

| Status Quo Scripts                                                                              | The Diversity Project                                                                                |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Excellence is exclusive:</b> Gatekeeping with rigid requirements                             | <b>Possibilities:</b> “Anyone can be a marine scientist. Anyone.”                                    |
| <b>“Sink or Swim”:</b> Save yourself! Challenge is for the strong, support for the weak         | <b>Proactive support:</b> “Set you up for success”                                                   |
| <b>“Publish or perish”:</b> Prioritize research at all costs                                    | <b>“You are more important than any data. Period.”</b>                                               |
| <b>Quick Fixes:</b> Seek the quick fix, the one that looks most efficient and minimizes change. | <b>“No panic button,”</b> but redundancies enable adaptation, which is understood to be a necessity. |
| <b>Race evasive:</b> Ignore race and racism, even when it’s salient                             | <b>Racialized and Resilient:</b> Affirming Blackness; Talking about colonialism                      |

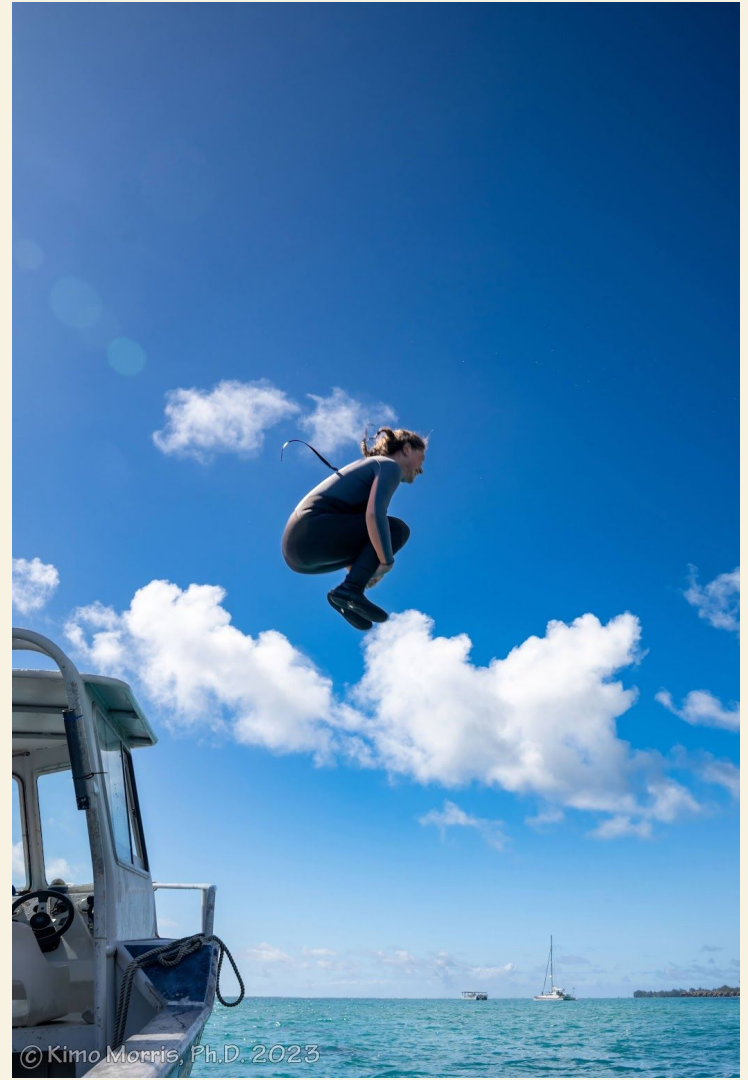
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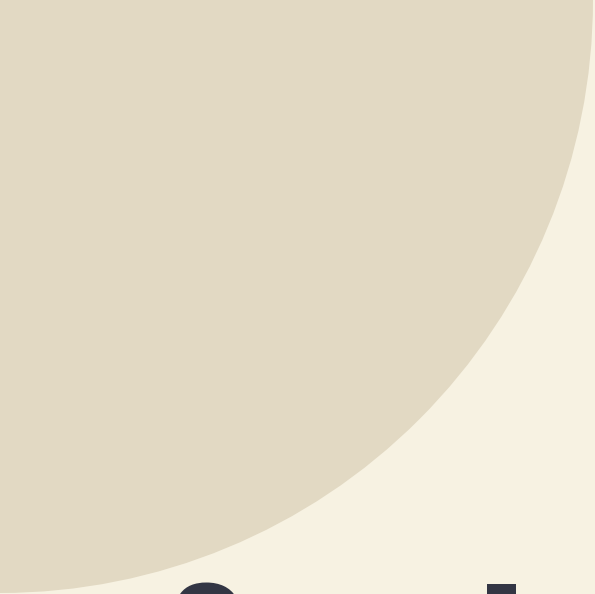
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**from SINK OR SWIM to  
PROACTIVE SUPPORT**

**“WE’RE GOING TO SET YOU UP  
FOR SUCCESS”**





# Conclusion

# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:

## What you can do to connect access & climate

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### REWRITE DISCIPLINARY SCRIPTS

Unlearn preferences for incremental change & low-hanging fruit. Remember other worlds are possible.

# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Individual and organizational learning are necessary, but insufficient.  
Also necessary are

**1. Listening to, seeing value in, and building trust** with people and institutions beyond the elites who usually command our default attention and respect:

- Students (current & prospective)
- Minority-serving institutions

**2. Embedding what we learn into our policies & practices.**

*These mechanisms destabilize the social foundations of exclusion and inequity.*

# Changes with potential for systemic impacts



- **REPAIRING BROKEN OR WEAK CONNECTIONS**

where system performance depends on a strong connection.

- **VICIOUS TO VIRTUOUS CYCLES**

facilitates healthy feedbacks & dependencies

- **REMOVAL OF BIASES, CORRUPTIONS, OR CONTAMINANTS**

in an otherwise healthy system

- **CHANGING RULES & PRACTICES WITH DISPARATE IMPACT**

so the system is not working better for privileged groups (especially in ways that are irrelevant to the purpose of the system).

An underwater photograph looking up from a dark, rocky crevice. Bright sunlight penetrates the water from above, creating several distinct, parallel rays of light that fan out across the scene. The water is a deep, clear blue. In the upper right, the surface of the water is visible, showing ripples and reflections of light. To the right, a rugged, dark rock formation is covered in vibrant green and yellow coral and other marine life. Small, dark fish are scattered throughout the water, some swimming near the light rays. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and ethereal, suggesting a hidden world beneath the surface.

**OTHER WORLDS ARE POSSIBLE**

An underwater photograph showing sunlight rays filtering through the water, illuminating a rocky seabed covered in green coral and small fish. The scene is vibrant and serene, with the sun's rays creating a dramatic effect of light and shadow.

# Stay connected

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**EquityGradEd.org for**

High quality faculty professional development  
Consortium membership  
Research-based resources & tools