



LET'S TALK ABOUT RACE

An Interview with
Thuy Thi Nguyen
President, Foothill College



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ABOUT THE INTERVIEW SERIES

In March 2019, ACE held a plenary session at its 101st Annual Meeting called “Talking About Race.” During the panel discussion, Beverly Daniel Tatum, author of *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” and Other Questions About Race*, and Robin DiAngelo, author of *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, candidly discussed the role of race in America and on college campuses. Moderated by Lorelle L. Espinosa, ACE’s vice president for research, and generously sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the panel emphasized the importance of college leaders engaging on issues of race and racism with their campus communities.

Continuing the discussion started by the panel, the Let’s Talk About Race interview series captures the voices of prominent higher education scholars and leaders as they share their perspectives and experiences on race and ethnicity in higher education.

This series supplements ACE’s *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education: A Status Report*, which examines over 200 indicators, looking at who gains access to educational environments and experiences, and how trajectories differ by race and ethnicity. Additional detail about *Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education* can be found at equityinhighered.org. To watch the panel discussion that inspired this series, please visit acenet.edu/ACE2019Race.

ABOUT THUY THI NGUYEN

Thuy Thi Nguyen serves as the seventh president of Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California, a position she has held since July 2016. Nguyen is the first Vietnamese American college president in the country.

Prior to her arrival at Foothill, Nguyen served as interim general counsel for the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office. As overseer of equal employment opportunity plans for 72 community college districts and 113 colleges, she led the move to an innovative funding approach that encourages community colleges to assess and strengthen their efforts in equal employment opportunity.

For over 11 years, Nguyen was the general counsel for the Peralta Community College District. At different points during her tenure at Peralta, she served in additional roles as acting vice chancellor for human resources, district-wide strategic planning manager, and legislative liaison. From January to June 2015, Nguyen took temporary leave from Peralta to serve as interim president and chief executive officer of the Community College League of California.

Nguyen earned her BA in philosophy from Yale University and her juris doctor degree from the University of California, Los Angeles School of Law, where she was a member of the inaugural class of the David J. Epstein Public Interest Law and Policy Program. Nguyen is a Rotarian and a Paul & Daisy Soros Fellow.

Q· In general, what do you feel is the role of higher education in breaking down barriers across race?

Higher education is the quintessential place for breaking down such barriers. There have been enough fights in the courts about the fundamental right to education—about whether that, in fact, is a fundamental right. That right has played out in a very significant way in many of the affirmative action cases in higher education.

Higher education is the place for the conversation around civil rights, particularly with regards to race. Higher education is also not only the place where race issues, race politics, and racial dynamics come into play, but it also is such a ticket to social mobility. So the ability to have access to that ticket of greater social mobility becomes more essential in addressing the racial divides in our country.

Then, of course, higher education is a place of robust conversations, robust ideas, and research. Students come to their own self-actualization, their own sense of their self in the world, and that sense of self has to come with a sense of understanding of their own racial and cultural identity, that of those around them, and the lived experiences of everyone. Empathy comes with that.

So higher education becomes part of the place where race issues come to a head, but also is part of the place where race issues can be resolved and discussed, and the place for that ability to access the greater world through social mobility that higher education can provide. It is quintessential.

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I think education in general, whether it be higher education or K–12, is the battleground. As I often say, within the context of education, the key civil rights battleground is the playground.

Q· Given your life experiences and professional preparation, how did you obtain a knowledge base in equity, diversity, inclusion, and social justice in higher education?

Well, my answer has two parts. One, in terms of just my own lived personal experience. I'm a refugee from Vietnam. I was born in Vietnam. We fled by boat when I was three or four years old. We were at sea for 20, 25 days. I'm so grateful for what America has done, even though at the same time it was very much a key player in that war. I am grateful for America accepting us as refugees, especially in light of the conversation of immigration today, both legal and illegal. You know, I often have to remind our students that it wasn't until someone recognized me and my family as refugees that we were then legal. We were just fleeing communism. So that lived experience, in terms of just being an immigrant, and the dynamic of acculturation, coming into a country where not a lot of people around you look like you is eye-opening. It has a cultural lens, it has a racial lens.

I was living in the South, in New Orleans, at the time too and growing up there were a lot of experiences that came with that too, racially. Then my family and I moved to Oakland, California, and I started living as a minority within a minority community. That was really grappling with high poverty rates, with high crime rates, and just knowing that that was our world. Seeing all of that and knowing all of that just got me really passionate around issues of social justice and civil rights.

After law school, I came back to the Oakland area and did a lot of work around desegregation. I was in a law firm representing and helping school districts like Stockton Unified and San Jose Unified with their court-ordered desegregation consent decree, supporting, advising, and counseling the school district and seeing their equity plan.

While in law school, I also served on the court monitoring team for the San Francisco Unified School District. Just really being keen into how the schools were really the battleground for civil rights issues. I was just really in tune, maybe because I was already looking in that direction around how race plays out in education.

In terms of my professional preparation, it really started with a lot of the desegregation work and being a lawyer. Then more recently, I was the interim general counsel for the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, which is our state system regulatory office that regulates all 115 community colleges in this state. I made a commitment to be the interim in that role and be loaned, essentially, from the Peralta Community College District where I was general counsel to the state system office, because I knew that the legal office oversaw equal employment opportunity (EEO). We had just received more than \$60 million from the governor to hire full-time faculty. There hadn't been that kind of infusion of money to hire new full-time tenure-track faculty in the system for some time. Knowing the racial diversity gap of full-time faculty in our ranks, I just knew that we could not waste this money and needed to use this opportunity to hire a more diverse faculty. I made the commitment to serve as the interim general counsel for the legal division and made it my highest priority to focus on the EEO work so that people would understand the legal requirements around equal employment opportunity, and through that process be able to help diversify the faculty ranks.

At our sister college, De Anza College, there was an economic researcher from UC Santa Cruz who studied the issues of poverty within workforce development. In the data he saw how the student success performance equity gap for students of color was actually less when students are being taught by faculty of color. So he followed that lead, did more number crunching, and in fact, it proves that the gap closed from about 20 to 50 percent when students are taught by a faculty of color. Utilizing that research, and knowing the legal requirements, I

set out to change the funding formula for the state. We required professional development and training involved in that legal requirement, to really infuse the kind of conversation that we need to have in hiring people with that new money that we were receiving from the state.

One of the things that I feel very fortunate in is having a legal degree, and studying very particularly the role of race and the legal parameters of race—because in California we also have what is called Prop 209, which essentially eliminated affirmative action. It had a ripple effect in all public sectors, not just education. Knowing the law allowed me to not be afraid to talk about race. What I discovered during the work at the chancellor's office is people were even afraid to even say the words “racial diversity.” Like, somehow even the word diversity would violate Prop 209, or to even think about race is a violation of Prop 209. Knowing the law allowed me to be very comfortable operating in that space without any fear of violation of law.

Q· So considering that experience, your academic background, and your experience in higher education and in law, what kinds of training, formal and informal, would you recommend for faculty who have said, for example, “These issues are not part of my discipline,” or “Atoms don't see race?”

In terms of faculty, I would say it's threefold. It relates to all faculty, no matter what discipline, but let's hone in on the STEM disciplines. One is the curriculum itself, two is the faculty, and three is the students.

In terms of the curriculum itself, there has to be a real understanding that science is not so objective that it doesn't have biases, and the biases vary in different ways. We can have all the historical-critical race conversations around the biases of science—how science has been used to really weed out a determined certain superiority of race, and gender, for example.

Obviously, the anthropologists, sociologists, and all the other disciplines could make comments on the

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sciences. But I think it's also how the curriculum is presented and how it's structured. One of our faculty at Foothill, a biology faculty member, recognized that when students think of a scientist, they don't think of people of color. They don't think of women. Instead, if you name all the scientists that you've learned from, K–12, and even in college, they're basically White men. So how do students feel like that development of science and the scientific method and all of that is something that they see themselves and their own background reflected in? We have to be very cognizant of that. So this particular faculty member makes a point at the beginning of class to always introduce a scientist of color, or a female scientist, or an LGBTQ+ scientist. He's received a major grant to work with USF to develop out more of that in the curriculum and [to highlight] the contributions of diverse scientists in the area. That's just one of many examples of curricular teaching and how you introduce concepts and the world of science to students.

Then there is the teacher themselves. So in the research that I mentioned earlier at De Anza College, there was a high correlation of students of color not only doing well if they're in STEM, but if they're taught by a STEM instructor. For instance, if the instructor of color is a chemistry instructor, this student of color is more likely to stay in that chemistry class. [Not only] successfully finishing that chemistry class, but also majoring in chemistry. The instructors themselves serve as a vehicle for encouragement for students of color to stay in STEM. This is more reason the focus on diversity in STEM is really, really critical for faculty diversity in teaching STEM.

The third is the students themselves. So in STEM, because there aren't many students of color, there is this burden of representation that students of color

feel when they are in those classes, where they are such the far few. Even from a school that may be very racially diverse—their STEM classes may not be. Claude Steele really speaks to the stereotype threat when performances are being asked of students in the STEM area. There really is that burden of representation that they're not only having to deal with the tests themselves but also the failure and success. If they don't make it, they think about how they are representing their race within that context. And there is enormous pressure with that.

People teaching in STEM need to be fully cognizant of how stereotype threat can be even more accentuated in STEM. So those are the three folds. There is so much to unpack in terms of really helping STEM faculty understand that.

Q- If you were to educate students differently so that they evolve into more critically conscious, equity-minded citizens, how would you do it if money were not a factor?

I think we make too many excuses around money, because equity can still be achieved without money. At the same time, we definitely need money because it's such a tall order in many regards. For instance, the kind of professional development, the kind of time that we need for faculty and students to create space for themselves does require money, but money is not essential in that. Money should not be ever an excuse, quite frankly, not to do equity work.

That said, in terms of dreaming big one of the things that I'm doing at Foothill College—and it's very much equity-driven on my part—is a college-wide initiative, in some ways a rebranding of our college, called Service Leadership. It's this concept of harnessing students' leadership skills, and their leadership voice, through the service of others. It has a noble notion to it, so it's very big in that way. Some would say quite visionary in that way, especially for community college. Community colleges sometimes are seen too much as the assembly line of education—you go through, you get your degree, you get

what you need in terms of the paperwork, and then get out and get work or transfer.

But I really feel that we can never miss out, even if they only stay with us for two years, on the opportunity to see students as fully human beings with their own self-actualization and their contribution to society. So to that extent, it is grand and noble, but it is actually grounded in some strategic thinking from an equity standpoint.

Leadership is another way of seeing agency. For students of color, it is really important for them that they see themselves as agents in their work, both in and out of their educational journey. To validate that they already have those leadership abilities, and leadership either right now or leadership potential for the future, is really critical for students of color.

The second is it has been shown that students of color in any discipline, and it's also the case for women in STEM, that their academic work is much more meaningful for them and they're more likely to stay and engage in their academic work if they know immediately how their studies could affect and benefit their communities of interest. This notion of "service" is service of whatever community they define as important to them. We have done a plethora of things, but one is a culmination of research and service leadership work in our symposium, which has run for two years now. The last one, there were over 250 students participating, and they present, either poster board or orally, on their service leadership research project and how it has an effect on and benefits society. It very much has a theme that is focused on students of color, although it's for everyone. It's this general belief that every student will benefit from it, in terms of their empathy consciousness, their society consciousness, and then it definitely is more in terms of impact for students of color.

That's what I've been doing in terms of service leadership and it's this notion of global citizenship. I just finished my third year as president of Foothill College and so as we deepen the work of service leadership, we need to also deepen the racial justice component

thread of it. For instance, right now students are very interested in climate change, but we also need to deepen that work for them to understand racial environmental justice issues within that context. Many of our students are going abroad through the service leadership projects—one group just came back from Guatemala. Another one is going to Honduras. One is Ireland, Philippines, Malaysia. So they're going to go places that need their help, and the students are just starting to talk about the racial lens of that, and the bias that comes with that, and how they need come to the work with a sense of consciousness around that.

I'm very proud. It's an evolution of growth, and I'm proud that our college is heading in that direction.

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Q· Finally, from your perspective, what are the most immediate opportunities for college and university presidents around cultivating an inclusive campus where diversity, equity, and inclusion are woven in the cultural fabric of a successful institution? We're really particularly interested in hearing what your experiences have been like from this level of leadership that you have at Foothill College.

We have such a responsibility as a college president, in terms of that cultivation of that inclusive campus. Mostly in our own practice personally, but also in being strategic and using tactical practices that are unequivocal as to what we're doing. I think it's really, really critical.

First, before I address how we proactively do that, I think one word of caution. And it's from hearing from enough people who have been doing the equity work, around their concerns during budget cuts. I

want to address [budget cuts] first because our college president colleagues are mindful of these, but need to be even more mindful. The budget cuts are cyclical; they are going to happen. We have to be very cognizant of what role we still play in the budget. During budget cuts, obviously, it seems like it's—"Just make the numbers work," right? But we have to remember that the numbers express our values. So many times when it comes to budget cuts, equity programs, equity initiatives, outreach, learning communities that are equity-focused, professional development for equity, are usually first on the chopping block.

Sometimes we just have to make those cuts, there is no doubt about it. But I think it's really important that we recognize that those programs were not just an added enhancement. Some people may see that as a "plus one." So if you cut it, you're just bringing it back to zero. And then when opportunities and money come in again, you can bring it back to plus one.

When you cut budgets like that, it's more than the dollars that you cut, you are also making a value statement. So it doesn't come back to zero. It actually is a negative three. Then when the budget is better, and you're trying to work your way back up, you are so behind, and the cynicism and skepticism on campus by employees who are there more permanently than students is really a problem.

In my last budget cut scenario, I actually had a guiding principle that the college will be cognizant and evaluate and assess the racial impact of any cut. I made it very clear at the very beginning of the process, so that everyone understood, not only am I cognizant, but I will be keeping track of it. I think that's really important because we will have good times, we will have bad times—the good times we can never get back quickly when it comes to equity issues.

Now, that's from a budget standpoint. In terms of proactively creating an inclusive environment as a college president, everybody has to know that you are not only equity-minded, but you really know how to push the equity conversation. You know how

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to talk it, you know how to walk it, you know how to engage with it, and you are very comfortable in it. That takes some skills. Some of us may already have that because we have lived experiences, we have professional experiences prior to coming into our role, so we're much more comfortable with certain terminologies and with certain nuances. For any college president who may not be as comfortable with that, they'd better quickly get comfortable with that, and have the right confidants and advisers around them to be comfortable with that because people are watching, they're observing, and they want to know that you are a trustworthy leader when it comes to issues of racial equity.

The other thing I think is very important, this goes even beyond the conversation of diversity, equity, and inclusion, but it is fundamental to the work of cultivating that, and that is always to be student-centered. The conversation, whenever it comes back to students and how we are student-centered and student-focused, it's amazing how our mind and our orientation work if we come at it from that standpoint. Somehow solutions, ways of talking about things, initiatives, they become clearer. They become clearer around how we support students of color, when we come at it from a student-focused standpoint.

It's easy to say student-focused. It's like, "Of course I think of students. Why wouldn't I?" But there are differences. There are nuances, and you can tell. Being very student-focused, then, has you being much more empathetic and solution-oriented around students of color.

When I came on board, there was an equity plan already in place. And the equity plan included hiring for the director of equity. I actually elevated that position to a higher level, a dean. And even though a dean normally is not a member of the president's cabinet, I made that position a cabinet position. She sits in our cabinet meeting, she's advising me, making it fundamental to the work, and making it fundamental to my own work. That's just one of many examples where I always elevate whenever an opportunity present itself. But I elevate in a very deep and meaningful way. I don't just elevate for the sake of elevating it, and I can give you my reasoning. My argument, my reasoning, the logic behind why that is the case. And that's really important and [also] to make it very public because many CEOs may be already equity-minded, but when you don't make gestures that are very public and unequivocal for everyone to see, it's very hard to just say that you're equity-minded, right?

When it comes to issue of race, as much as I believe I may have a lot of preparation for this work and I definitely have a lot of motivation for this work, it is also very humbling. And my lived experience is only one lived experience in the whole spectrum of racial lived experiences. So it is very humbling, and I often find myself receding a little bit and creating that space for people so that they can show up and they could bring forth their own lived experience, bring forth their own expertise into this space and help influence the space. Some college presidents would call that letting things happen organically.

I'm constantly doing a check—it's almost like talking to myself around that balance of humility and courage. I think it's a healthy balance, frankly, because I don't want to be a demagogue because that doesn't help. Yet at the same time, I need to bring my expertise and bring forth everything that I can bring to the table. Be my own consultant in a way. Be my own confidant. Be the college's facilitator in that.

So I say to all CEOs who may be grappling in the similar fashion that I'm grappling, and that is when

it comes to equity, I had to even call my mentor and talk through this with her. And she says when it comes to equity, do not be humble about it. That's just a personal development as a college president in terms of entering into that place. That balance of racial humility, and at the same time racial courage.

Q· Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

[With some institutions] their equity plans are more about their expenditure plans. They're basically, "How are you going to spend your equity money?" That's not how you should approach equity work. It's not an expenditure plan. It's a vision. It's a call of action. It's how you plan to spend any of your money. It doesn't matter whether it's equity money. It's how you plan to coordinate your college in such a way to cultivate that diversity, equity, and inclusion, and therefore create an environment that is equitable for your students. Your students feel that when students of color in particular come on your campus, they need to feel that they own the campus. The campus is theirs. It's not for them, it is theirs.

When I see students of color walk on our campus and they are walking as though they own it, that's how I know we have succeeded.

When I see students of color walk on our campus and they are walking as though they own it, that's how I know we have succeeded. Our plan should not be about a plan of expenditure, and I really want to underscore that. That's why at our college I've said now that I'm in my role, we're doing equity plan 2.0. I think it's very critical to underscore that equity work is not just about how they spend the money.

The second thing is I am putting in place a lingo, a concept. I really believe that the solution is with us already. At Foothill College, we have so many amazing people at our college who are teaching social justice issues, who are teaching race issues in so many

subject areas, and yet they are not actually quintessential in our institution's own equity work. It's just like, "What? Your own college is in need of your expertise!" So I am creating an environment where I'm trying as best as I can to bring forth the faculty's disciplinary expertise to infuse and guide the college's equity work, and how we see equity, and how we can close the gap.

We have faculty members teaching stereotype threat, implicit bias, and the definition of race. Yet they are not as involved as I'd like them to be in our own college's social justice equity work. So I have reframed the decision and said that our college is that larger classroom, and all the people at our college are in that classroom and we're going to bring all of our disciplinary expertise, our lived experience to the forefront in that work.

So I'm creating that narrative, but I'm also doing something to pull that in. So when people go to professional development, I have a series called Thursday Thoughts where they come back and they talk about their work. And I'm starting a journal, an academic journal, where faculty who are doing this work of equity will actually get published on our campus. I'm hoping to share it with graduate schools of education if they're interested in that side of the practicum for studying equity. I'm really trying to encourage faculty, saying, "Your own disciplinary expertise is critical and had you not been at Foothill, we may have even hired you as a consultant to help consult our college." That's the framework that I'm creating for our college.



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