**Tia McNair**

Learn why the equity work is everyone's work at the institution.

**AS** [00:00:00] For today's podcast, it's a pleasure to have Dr. Tia Brown McNair. Dr. McNair is the vice president in the Office of Diversity Equity in Student Success and Executive Director for the Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation Campus Centers at the American Association of Colleges and Universities in Washington, DC. She oversees both funded projects and the organization's continuing programs on equity, inclusive excellence, high impact practices and student success. She is the lead author of From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education, and the book Becoming a Student Ready College: A New Culture of Leadership for Student Success. Welcome to the Student Success podcast Tia.

**Tia McNair** [00:00:45] Thank you so much, Al. Looking forward to the conversation. Thanks for having me.

**AS** [00:00:49] Thank you. I'd like to start all podcast by asking the guests if they wouldn't mind sharing perhaps a story hobby, a special talent, would you share something, please?

**Tia McNair** [00:01:00] Well, I'm definitely not going to share special talent because I'm not sure I have a special talent or not. But I am a huge baseball fan, so anyone who knows that, especially for the Washington Nationals. My son is 15. He's in ninth grade. He plays travel baseball, and he plays for his high school team. He's on varsity. All excited about that. They're heading into the playoffs. And I had the opportunity with my family to go to one of the World Series games in 2019 and to see the Nats play. So that's a big highlight. If I can get to the baseball field, I'm a happy camper.

**AS** [00:01:34] Baseball fan, huh? So you must know the game really well, the rules and everything. So I have a question about that. Then how might you use baseball as a metaphor for the equity work?

**Tia McNair** [00:01:46] Oh, that's an interesting question. Well, I try my best to not think about the equity piece when I'm at a baseball game, because that's my relaxation time. You got to be able to separate that, you know, for that work life balance. But I do think that baseball is a game of a failure. I mean, we know that baseball is a game of failure. And we know that in this equity work, we have to keep trying. I mean, we have to keep honing our skills. We have to keep thinking about the game and the way that we play and how when things are delivered to us, are they going to throw is a curveball, is it going to be, you know, a fastball? What is it? What is it going to be? And how am I going to adjust to make to advance the work? So if you're thinking about it that way, you're always strategizing both. If you're on offense or defense, you're trying to think about how do I advance the runner, How do I get on base, How do I do that? That's the same thing with equity work. We're always constantly thinking about the ways in which we have to adapt to our current circumstances. How do we adapt to what we're being given or thrown at us in order to have the wins that we want to advance the work that we seek that is important to achieve. So I guess in that way. I never thought about that. That's a great question, Al? Thank you.

**AS** [00:03:05] Thank you. That was a wonderful answer. So speaking of playing, right, the audience is primarily practitioners. They're practitioners. If they're going to play this game. What they always appreciate, some concrete examples of the plays, if you will, that you've seen out there in higher ed. We know the why, for the most part, I think it's been widely known campuses are more and more disaggregating their data. They are more data informed, I think, than ever before. There's also the the what, you know, be more equitable, culturally responsive, teaching, etc.. Then there's a how. In your travels, in your work with so many colleges, could you be so kind as to provide some examples of what you seen in terms of the how?

**Tia McNair** [00:03:54] Yeah. So I've had the great fortune of working at AAC&U for many, many years and had the privilege of working with many institutions, whether that's through our special projects or whether that's through our summer institute or at our conferences, it's it comes in different stages for different campuses. So you have to think about the institutional context. You have to think about the institutional goals and priorities, which I know that everyone who's listening to this and you know that, but how you enter the work is going to depend on your capacity and what you seek to achieve. So some institutions are looking at, as you mentioned, disaggregated data on student outcomes, whether that's course completion, graduation, retention, whatever. And they're asking the question, okay, why do these disparities exist? What is happening in the classroom and the co-curricular in those experiences? And then others are looking at assignment design, they're looking at how do we actually think about asking the question about equity and student success when it comes to disaggregating data on student achievement of learning outcomes, whether that's in a high impact practice design. So it's all different ways. So I can give you some examples. Of what our campuses are doing, and especially from our truth, racial healing and transformation work because that's another aspect of how we are thinking about students success and belonging and inclusion in this work. A couple of things in relationship to what campuses are doing. Our high impact practices Student Success Institute is coming up. We're doing another virtual institute and the faculty for the Institute, we have the opportunity to come together in person and plan, and to think about the curricula for the institute and what it is that we really wanted to engage with during our different strands of topics. And as we were talking about this, we're focusing on institutions gathering the data, looking at their existing data sources. And so many institutions, when you're talking about examining student success with high impact practices, for example, in asking the question, they're still really not, there's not a formalized way of thinking about high impact practices. It's kind of, well, this department over here is doing more on undergraduate research or this department over here maybe doing more service learning or this department over here, maybe doing more on writing intensive courses. And it's still haphazard around for many of them. So some of the institutions that we've seen that have been successful have a more structured way of collecting data about the high impact practices that are being offered. Who has access to them, how they're accessing them, and then they're actually able to look at disaggregated data on who is actually developing proficiencies and how are they defining student success, whether that's retention and whether that's graduation, whether that's progression in the courses or whether or not they're developing the skill sets that are associated with the high impact practices like critical thinking or problem solving or ethical reasoning. So many institutions that we work with are providing the high impact practices, for example, from a student success perspective, because they know high impact practices. There's a correlation between students participation and their engagement with their post-secondary pathway and then success. But many are still struggling with, okay, do we have enough evidence to make those informed decisions about which one should we scale? Which ones are the most effective at our institutions? Which ones are what we call high quality ones that are actually helping students develop those outcomes that I just talked about. So institutions who do that well, and I'm not going to name names on this podcast because that's always gets me in trouble when I highlight certain institutions are the ones that are looking at their existing data sources. They're looking at what their goals are associated with high impact practice implementation, for example. They're looking at how they design them and are they designed to help students meet those defined outcomes that they're talking about and that they said, this is what we're doing in high practices, and then they're able to disaggregated data and they're able to ask the question, okay, who was a successful for, you know, who has the most success in this? Why did they have this success in these high impact practices? What are we learning from the students experience and who hasn't had the most success? What are those barriers? And there's obstacles. I remember my colleague Ashley Finley and I, we were doing this national project on assessing underserved student engagement, high impact practices, and at one of our focus groups, when we were engaging with students, one of them said is luck of the draw. It's luck of the draw. What whether or not we get these experiences, and that's what we don't want. If we know that there's a direct relationship to students participating in these experiences, we have to be very focused and intentional on the data that we have and the data that we are collecting and so that we can assess it. So that's one example of high impact practices, but there are other ones. So I'm hoping we get a chance to talk about that.

**AS** [00:08:57] Yes, Thank you. As colleges examine the data and high impact practices, in my coaching work, what I found I find there are equity green lighters, equity yellow letters, and equity red letters. We want to support the green letters as much as possible. The red letters are, it's tough to get them to move from red to yellow to green, but I spend a lot of my time actually trying to get the yellow lighters because it's easier to move them to green. Yellow letters or those that are kind of still against the fence. What do you mean? Don't I need to do this with all students? Why do I need to do this with these students? From your experience, what have you found has been effective, productive, in moving those equity yellow letters to green?

**Tia McNair** [00:09:50] Well, for still sticking with the high impact practice example. If we're looking at that, what those practices are not new. Undergraduate research, community based learning, writing, intensive courses, service learning, first year experiences. These are things that institutions have been doing for many, many years. And so in order to get the yellow lighters, as you call them, and the red lighters, we remind them that we're not asking them to change their practices. We're saying to them, let's strengthen it. How do we actually, you've been doing a lot of these practices already as an institution, as a department, as a program. So how are they working for your students? Are they working for your students? What makes them high impact for them? So many again, these aren't brand new strategies. We're talking about strengthening the work. And I think many of the, much of the work that we do on student success is about that we're not asking you to change everything that you're doing. We're asking you to actually examine and think critically about how am I doing it? Am I doing it in a way that best serves our students and supports their success, especially the diversity of the students that we now have today within our educational pipeline and our educational system. And then to start asking those equity questions related to the work. Well, when we disaggregate the data, whether that's by race, ethnicity, whether that's by socioeconomic status, whether that's by first gen. That is how an institution that seeks to think about their student identity groups. Are we be an equitable, are we on our path towards equal opportunity for all of our students? And how does that work? So I would approach it that way and explain, and that's how I've done that. It's very much approaching it as what it is that you're already doing in your courses. How do you know that that's actually having the benefit for your students that you're seeking it related to their outcomes, related to their progression? And then what can we change to strengthen that, to actually make sure that those activities and those assignments and those experiences are designed in the best way possible? And I think when you approach it that way, because people get very fearful when you come in and there's a new initiative or you want to change everything that I'm doing now, we're not changing everything that you're doing. We want to figure out what's the best educational environment that we can design for our students. And when one of the things that we say in our book is that when we see inequities in student outcomes, it's a sign that something we have designed isn't working as intended. And that's our responsibilities for educators to go into that deeper inquiry and to ask those questions about the why, why is this happening? How can I change how what is it about the way that I've designed this that I can better reaches? And that's where it comes in, where we may engage in more culturally responsive pedagogy. We may think about access to learning opportunities, we may think about peer support. You know, within this network is it's all there's no simple answer. And it all depends on the institution, the students, the context.

**AS** [00:12:49] Would you mind unpacking a high impact practice or two?

**Tia McNair** [00:12:53] Sure, as I've already mentioned, there are things like undergraduate research, first year experience. Many institutions have first year experiences where they bring students in and there's a shared common experience for students to get them adjusted and ready for success. At the postsecondary institution we have writing intensive courses. You have global learning, you have study abroad. I mean, there are many different aspects. And just because it's not on our list of what we call high impact practices portfolios, for example, it doesn't mean that it's not a high impact practice experience. I mean, we have many institutions that say their leadership models that they have at their campus is a high impact learning experience because students who participate in it have higher learning gains. Those who are talking about their advising models, talking about their peer mentoring models, they may actually be high impact practices. So it's really the data piece key to this examining our existing structures and our existing practices at our campus to see are they actually making a difference for student success? Whom are they making a difference for? How are they making a difference? Can we scale it to a in a more effective way? So whether we're talking about HIPs, whether we're talking about teaching and learning, whether we're talking about professional development opportunities for faculty and educators on campus to think about how they implement this. We should always have an assessment mindset to this. We should always be thinking about, is this working? Why is this working? What do we see? How do we scale this That's so important?

**AS** [00:14:28] I have something called the three month rule when I work with campuses. And what I remind them about is when they're working on major priorities, right? They say, Oh, Al, we have a year to work on this. And I say, Well, not really. Because the typical campus, especially because you need faculty, they really only have three months in a year to get priority work done. And what do you mean? I say, Well, let's think about it. Summer. So many people are gone. September we're too busy. Start of the semester. October is okay. November and December. Holidays and finals. We're lucky to squeeze in a meeting or two. January, we're gone. February's like September. Start of a new semester. March is okay. There's a little bit of a spring fatigue, but it seems to be okay. April, maybe part of April because you have spring break and then May forget about it. And so I tell them, well, don't be the typical campus, because that's what happens at the typical campus. There's so much that higher education practitioners, whether it be administrators or faculty or classified professionals, so many hurdles within their own experience. Right. We're trying to change the student experience, but sometimes we don't think about we need to change the college personnel experience. We have dysfunctional committee structures, the three month rule, the equity yellow lighters that actually know how to maneuver those dysfunctional committee structures in such a way that nothing ever gets done. We looked at the data and, you know, I don't know, is that really accurate? Can we look at that further? And then they come back. Well, you know, I still have concerns. Right. And so the campuses that you have found that have been able to overcome the three month rule, dysfunctional committee structure. Have you found how they've been able to do that by chance?

**Tia McNair** [00:16:31] So first of all, you just describe something that's very true to what is a barrier for any type of institutional transformation effort. Our system is not designed to support that. We have so many competing priorities and other responsibilities just in the day to day functioning of the institution that to add on that concept of, Oh, we need to think about transformation for student success, we need to do the assessment that I'm talking about. We need to look at the data sources, we need to think about the educational design, all of those things. I think anybody, any talk to any educator, they would say, I would love to be able to spend all of my time or most of my time thinking about that because that's what I was actually got me into this work that got me trained well, I was trained to do this is because I have this desire to support higher levels of students success. So first of all, let's acknowledge that, let's acknowledge the fact that what we're saying right now is not easy for any institution because of that, all of the competing priorities. What I am and what I do say when I'm working with campuses a lot is in order for transformation to happen, for us to talk about transformation, for student success or transformation for equity, or for diversity or belonging, for whatever it is for assessment, whatever you're talking about, we have to sunset some things that no longer work, that are keeping us away from being engaged in that I think we have to focus our time and figure out, okay, you know what, this is not, this is something we've been doing, but it's no longer effective for our students. It's no longer effective for us, and it's not aligned with our institutional goals and priorities so that we can free up, if we can, some of that intellectual space and time to do the work that we're seeking. And so institutions that have done that well have reimagine what professional development looks like. They have reimagine what job assignments look like, and when they're talking about position description so that you do have that time. Yes, there are some. We've highlighted some of them in our book for becoming a student ready college of what that looks like. I encourage you to pick that up. There are examples in there where where we said how to reimagine and remake practice to support students in their success.

**AS** [00:18:43] Something that comes to mind that unfortunately it took a law to finally get rid of is that we know from the data that dumping most of our students into developmental ed, English and math produced atrocious disaggregated completion rates and made the student journey at our precious community colleges that much longer. We were losing so many students when we said, because of a test, you're going to have to redo high school English and math. And some institutions did the right thing, but as I like to call them, institutional conservatives really held on to no we really need to remediate. And we got to put these students, because of this test, into these very low 2 to 3 courses below transfer level math and English. And now and for example, in California, there had to be a law to say no more. No more. And now we're seeing more students, especially of color, completing English, transfer level, English and math than ever before. We got to find those leaders right here that are able. And what I mean, leaders, it doesn't always have to be the president because you don't need a title to have influence. It could be a very influential faculty be able to, as you noted, look, this isn't working. We got to do right by students so that a law doesn't have to be created in order to do the right thing. But it's so hard when educational institutions kind of are when you think about it, they kind of inherently, institutionally conservative. They just like to hold on to those practices. Is what they know. They inherited these things and they keep doing what they're what they're doing. Leadership matters right, Tia?

**Tia McNair** [00:20:33] Yes, it does. I mean, leadership is so important. That's why we talk about that is, and leadership in a very expansive way. It's not just my position. It's basically around shared purpose and shared goals and a commitment to that shared purpose and goal. And everybody plays a different role. Whatever that goal is, everyone plays a different role in that. But knowing and owning that piece and having agency, we talk a lot about agency and being able to speak up and to recognize when things aren't working. But that also requires an examination of the institutional culture for that to happen. For those conversations, without thinking about hierarchy within the system, where it's okay to question that, to raise those concerns, especially if you're somebody who is a frontline staff person or a frontline educator at a campus who may not be at those committee meetings, but those decisions are being made but are actually have input and guidance from their day to day interactions with students and what they're hearing that can inform those decisions made. So you're thinking about leadership in multifaceted way and leadership in a more expansive way. That's why, I was with Adrianna Kezar. I was with her last week at USC and then having an opportunity to always look at when she's talking about this shared equity leadership model and what that looks like and how to really question the hierarchy within and in making sure that people who are playing different roles and engaging in different responsibilities on campus are part of that shared equity leadership model. And that's what's so important when we're doing this work for student success. So yes, leadership matters from the hierarchy perspective of this, but leadership matters from a more expansive view of what that means on a day to day implementation basis. We all are leaders. We all play a role just like we talk about in our book. Everyone's an educator. I don't care what you do on campus, you play a role in contributing to the educational environment. And if we think about student success, if we think about a diversity and equity and inclusion work as a shared responsibility and a shared purpose, then what's my leadership role? What's the leadership role I'm taking in my sphere of influence at the institution? And I think that's something that we constantly need to be asking ourselves and not being passive in this, but being very active in our engagement because our institutions again, are not designed, they were never designed for what we know are the strategies that work for students success. Even the reward structures are not designed that way. So we have to actually think about how we integrate that into our current models and to remake them so that we can utilize the best evidence based research that we have. The research is saying, wait a minute, we know this works, and how do we actually engage that and put that into the reward and incentive structure for professional growth and professional development, not just for faculty, but first generation educators as well.

**AS** [00:23:28] As we wind down here in a little bit, I want to ask you something about I guess you can call it the equity tax. We want to have as many voices at the table when we decide, you know what, we we are going to investigate what we do and we want to change things. We want to have diversity in the table. And let's move forward with taskforces committees, work groups, etc., until we hire more, for example, black females, what I've seen is that they're already serving on like seven committees, five task forces, teaching full time. They're also asked to help with grants. We want their input, but we don't have enough of them. So there's kind of like this equity tax on them. What we ask so much of them, we want their input, but it's also so taxing on them until institutions hire more, is there an approach that you would recommend so that we can have their voice but also not overspend them? Because higher ed is already in and of itself. It can just chew you up and spit you out. But on top of that, when you're a particular group and there's not a lot of you in that institution, how can we be more, what's the word, kind toward them?

**Tia McNair** [00:24:54] So first of all, let me just tell you, it's not that we might have an equity tax or that there may be there is an equity tax on any racially minoritized group within higher education. And I know I can only speak for myself. I always felt that there's a there's a responsibility to be part of the group to speak up and to and to engage in the conversation and not step away, because there is that responsibility, I'm sure. But that's what the problem is, is that it is only put on those who have been racially minoritized within higher education. If an institution believes strongly as part of their mission and values and goals that their work is to support all students and their success and to understand and the lived experiences of the students and to understand how that influences the way that they engage and really value their various identities, then that is a responsibility of everyone at the institution. They shouldn't be where the colleagues who are white get to opt out of that equity tax because they're not from that group. So when institutions are seeing that is happening, that there is an equity tax on certain colleagues within the system, then that's first responsibility of leadership to say, no, this is a shared responsibility. We all play a role in this. It shouldn't be where there are some, they get to go off and do whatever they want and not take on that responsibility. It's everyone's responsibility. And that's where I think that more institutions need to take accountability with that. They need to be intentional in the way that work is distributed and that efforts, because we say it all the time in our work. This is the environment where all students have the opportunity to thrive. And then the work is put on a small group of educators on the campus. That's not acceptable. So that's I think that the work is that it should be the responsibility of everyone. We all bring different perspectives and different ideas, but where we see that happening is the responsibility of those who are in leadership to make sure that the distribution of work is there.

**AS** [00:27:03] Everyone, you're right. And it's why it's more it's even more important to bring those equity yellow letters to green so we have more people doing the work.

**Tia McNair** [00:27:14] Yes. Yes.

**AS** [00:27:15] You're right. Everyone has to be involved. So why don't we wrap up. Back again to baseball.

**Tia McNair** [00:27:22] Okay.

**AS** [00:27:23] Do you want to dig a little deeper about the metaphor between baseball and given our conversation today? Because you may have so many different dynamics within a team, perhaps, who plays the role of coach in the institution, who kind of plays the role of manager in the institution, who plays the role of kind of captain. I'm just curious, what are your thoughts?

**Tia McNair** [00:27:47] I think it depends on the topic. I think it depends on the area of expertise and looking at who has the capacity. So if I'm talking about assessment, then the assessment person at the institution who has that expertise will be the coach. And whether we're talking about assessment in the curricular or co-curricular, that's going to depend on who's on the team, how we're laying it out, who's managing that network, whether we're talking about guided pathways, whether we're talking about student success outcomes in co-curricular experiences, whether we're talking about study abroad or first year experience. It all depends on what the topic is, because there are different levels of expertise at the institution and we need to harness that and we need to lift that up. So it's not going to be the same coach, the same manager, the same players, the same strategy for everyone. But what unites the teams, if we're talking about the baseball, is that shared goal to get to the championship, to the division championship, to the to get to the World Series, to get to that. How do we get there? It may take different games, different strategies, different times in order to get us all there collectively to that end goal so that there's overall success. So. I don't think that is prescriptive or just one person playing one role. I think we have to be flexible and we have to think about who has the area of expertise and how do we build the capacity for more people to be on our team so that we can rotate them in and out in other and not in a negative way, but retain them in and out so that everybody gets understands their share of responsibility in the work?

**AS** [00:29:18] Well, with that, Tia, thank you so much for participating in the Student Success Podcast.

**Tia McNair** [00:29:24] Thank you, Al. Thanks for having me. Thanks. I appreciate it. I ejoyed the conversation.