

## AN INVITATION TO DISCOMFORT IN PURSUIT OF DIVERSITY, INCLUSION, AND EXCELLENCE

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When I received the call in the summer of 2019 asking me if I'd consider running (unopposed) for president of the Association for Education Finance and Policy (AEFP), I was completely surprised and elated. AEFP is the organization in which I grew up. It has been my intellectual and professional home since I first began attending the conference in 2004 as a second-year doctoral student. I gave my first conference presentation, shaking behind the podium, with several of my academic heroes in the audience. Over the years I've made strong personal and professional connections through AEFP, and I count several of our members among my closest friends. So, I was shocked, but thrilled. This organization has given me so much, and I was and remain eager to give back.

Of course, as one does, I began thinking about what I would talk about in my presidential address. I would talk about the importance of "research with consequence": applied research intended to foster change and continuous improvement in education policy and practice; the importance of working together with policy makers and practitioners to do this kind of research, so that we are using our knowledge and skills to address the real-life, real-time questions and needs of the people who are devoting their lives to improving kids' and adults' educations and long-term outcomes. This is the work for which AEFP is known.

But that was summer 2019—the world has changed in the last three years. And so, while the research, the work that we all do, must go on—and has gone on—and for that I'm incredibly grateful, I'm going to talk about something different than I'd planned.

These last few years have been tough. On everyone, and on some more than others. I'm generally a silver linings kind of person, but even the most starry-eyed optimists among us haven't been able to see the rainbows through the clouds every day or even most days lately.

Not to state the obvious, but we've been living through a global pandemic for the last two years. As of March 2022, over

[https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp\\_a\\_00396](https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00396)

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6 million people have died from COVID-19, nearly 1 million in the United States alone. Countless others have suffered long-term consequences of the disease, including debilitating symptoms of long COVID, economic challenges, struggles with mental and social health, and something that many of our own members have documented: massive impacts on the academic, socioemotional, and mental health of our students and educators.

Over this same time, we have seen the brutal murder of George Floyd. Of Ahmaud Arbery. Of Breonna Taylor. Of Dante Wright. And countless other racially motivated killings alongside countless examples of the racism inherent in much of our society. And we have experienced (some of you have even contributed to and led) an uprising, a demand for racial and social justice. As a broader society, we have begun—too late—to recognize what our BIPOC friends and colleagues have long known: that we are living through a second, longer-standing pandemic that has led to the deaths and destructions of lives and families.

Contributing to my difficulty with finding the silver lining, we are watching a war play out, and while Russia and Ukraine are taking center stage, there are other international atrocities occurring and affecting people across the globe.

All of this is exhausting. It is exhausting to think about our place in the world, in our communities, and how we can continue to work to improve the world around us. It is exhausting, because when we think deeply about what is happening around us, many of us are stuck in an uncomfortable place, recognizing our privilege and recognizing that with privilege comes responsibility to make things even marginally better for those without or with less.

But here *is* the silver lining: We are growing. All of this chaos, disruption . . . all of this discomfort we are experiencing on a daily, even hourly basis—it's giving us a chance to change. To be proactive about who we want to be—as individuals, as scholars, as educators, as policy makers. In fact, there is a long line of research that tells us that these kinds of times—the times when we are most challenged, when we are forced the most out of our comfort zones—these are the times when we grow the most. And that growth can be immensely productive.

So while I, probably like many of you, am craving normalcy and comfort, and I am tempted to retreat into my own little cocoon of familiarity so that I can stop living every minute and every day in a state of cognitive overload—I am going to challenge each of you and us together, as a community, to sit in the dissonance a little longer.

Before you all start whispering to each other that I'm insane, let me explain what I mean.

Piaget, that psychologist many of us had to read in grad school and then promptly forgot (I did, anyway), called times like these times of disequilibrium. And he along with a slew of other developmental and social psychologists posited and have since proven that cognitive growth happens most during these times of disequilibrium, or dissonance. Especially and mostly when we are forced into new situations with lots of uncertainty.

Diane Ruble, another developmental psychologist, shows that during these construction phases, we need to seek out new data, new information so that we can make sense of where we are and what we are experiencing—and this is precisely when we

can grow and learn the most (Ruble 1994; Chartrand, Ruble, and Trope 2001). But, critically, this can only happen when we *do not* retreat into the familiar, the comfortable, the easy. If we live in the discomfort, we can become better, we can become different, we can expand, we can know more.

What kind of dissonance am I suggesting? What more can we be expected to do?

I am going to challenge us to live our mission and vision as an organization. This is directly from our Web site, which I'm sure all of you visit often. But in case you haven't memorized all of it, here is some key text:

*AEFP is committed to being an intellectual community that fosters and welcomes diversity of opinions across multiple disciplinary, methodologic, and contextual backgrounds. We strive to welcome scholars and practitioners across all experience levels whose research and practice are based in disciplines, methods, and contexts that may or may not have been traditionally valued and advanced in education policy making. Ultimately, we strive to improve education policy so that all students have access to educational opportunities and are given the means to succeed in school and their lives.*

This may seem pretty run-of-the-mill. But in this statement, we are asking our AEFP community to live in some discomfort. To welcome a diversity of opinions from multiple disciplinary, methodological, and contextual backgrounds. To welcome scholars and practitioners across all experience levels whose research and practice are based in disciplines, methods, and contexts that may or may not have been traditionally valued and advanced in education policy making.

And, importantly, we posit that this is what is needed to accomplish our own mission, to achieve our collective goal—to ultimately improve education policy so that all students have access to educational opportunities and are given the means to succeed in school and their lives. In other words: We need to get out of our own comfort zones, out of our own boxes, to engage with others who are different than we are, so that we can do the kind of work for which AEFP is known—the kind of work that can change policy and practice, the kind that can inform and provide evidence that policy makers and educators can use to improve the lives of kids and adults.

We can accomplish this by increasing the diversity of our membership—and I'm thinking of diversity broadly as racial and ethnic, sexual orientation, disciplinary, methodological, diversity of professional roles—so that we can force ourselves to be uncomfortable more often, to be challenged and think deeply more frequently. Not just because diversity on its own is important, but because it will help us to grow, to innovate, to think creatively, to address new problems or problems that many of us have long ignored.

Because we are AEFP, and we are empirically focused researchers and users of research, it's important to point out that there is a large and growing trove of research that supports this assertion. Patricia Gurin, a professor emerita of psychology and women's studies at the University of Michigan, compiled and did her own research in support of the University of Michigan in the lawsuits *Gratz et al.* and *Gruter et al. v. Bollinger*. Her expert report (Gurin 1999) lays out the empirical evidence showing that when people are put into situations that require some disequilibrium or dissonance because we are forced or choose to interact with others who are not like us, with ideas that are

foreign and unfamiliar, we develop deeper understandings of the world and our role in it.

In particular, social diversity—multiple different kinds of people and ideas and thought processes—fosters civic engagement, helps grow our active and complex thinking processes that allow us to be more reflective and less reliant on the familiar, and improves engagement and motivation, as well as intellectual and academic skills. In other words, diversity of thought, disciplines, culture, background—all of these things will help us to be better thinkers, to produce better research. Diversity is a necessary component of our own efficacy and excellence. We need to be more, not less, inclusive. We need to seek out people who are not like us, welcome them into our community, and truly listen to each other. And we may not always like what we hear. But that's okay.

Not everyone will agree with me. Some of us love the world in which we become experts in our niche areas, we go super deep and not too wide, and we want to come to meetings like AEFPP so that we can talk to others who speak our own language. And that is okay, too. We have space for that. By broadening our scope, we don't have to become less deep, less focused.

And this does not mean, as some have told me they fear, that we are going to compromise on quality or on focus or on depth. We don't have to use the same conceptual frameworks or use the same methods or start from the same lived experiences in order to enter into an evidence-based conversation with each other. We don't even have to agree with each other. But we do need to be open to others' frameworks, methods, and lived experiences.

And what is important here is that my vision, my perspectives, my desires . . . they don't have to be yours. In fact, we are better off if my views and perspectives aren't just like yours, and if we have a community, a family, a culture, and an environment in which you feel comfortable telling me that, and I can ask you why, and we can turn to the empirical research—from many disciplines, methodologies, and approaches—to help educate each other. Because the more inclusive we are and accepting of each other's differences, the better our collective work, our collective impact will be.

But how do we get there? How do we become an AEFPP that has both broad scope and intense depth, that attracts and respects the best minds from all disciplines, methods, backgrounds, and lived experiences? I don't know. But again, I've turned to the research. There are many studies from the business, leadership, organization, and education fields that provide some insight. One that I like the most is from Dr. Damani White-Lewis, and I'm going to borrow liberally from one of his recent articles (White-Lewis 2002).

The first step? We need to develop and communicate our vision for equity, diversity, and inclusion. We need to develop this shared vision, and then we need to communicate it—to our membership and to the people who might be our members if we are successful.

Second, we need to allocate resources that both encourage and sustain activities that will foster diversity and inclusion.

Third, we need to make sure that we have supportive people working on this issue within the organization, while at the same time recognizing that it is up to all of us, but especially those of us who have been comfortable in this space, to take on the burden of

the work, recognizing that we have been comfortable at the expense of some who have not.

And fourth, we need to collect the data, monitor the progress, and hold ourselves accountable. We need to highlight and celebrate what is working, and figure out what isn't working and why not, so that we can improve it.

So in that vein, I have already shared some of AEFP's mission and vision, but here's the rest:

*AEFP is dedicated to the promotion of research and partnerships that can inform education policy and finance and improve education outcomes. AEFP promotes its mission by:*

- *Encouraging intellectually rigorous education finance and policy-related inquiry and scholarship capable of improving understanding and practice.*
- *Disseminating theoretical and practically useful knowledge.*
- *Stimulating responsible public and professional deliberation and debate regarding findings, practical policy applications, and research methods.*
- *Expanding the spectrum of scholars and practitioners from multiple intellectual disciplines and professional fields examining education finance and policy.*
- *Welcoming early career scholars and practitioners into conversations about education finance and policy and fostering an atmosphere of inclusion and respect.*
- *Centering justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in the work of the organization to ensure that all voices are heard and valued in discourse related to education finance and policy.*
- *Encouraging development and expansion of an international and interdisciplinary community of scholars, policy analysts, and professional practitioners concerned with education finance and policy as a field of scholarship and professional activity.*

There are a lot of words here. And they are basically all about diversity and inclusion. This is *already* in our mission statement. This is *already* who we strive to be.

What about step two? What programs are we putting into place to help us achieve this mission?

We have set up multiple diversity-focused initiatives over the last few years. They are aimed at several aspects of improving diversity in the profession, including racial and ethnic diversity, diversity of backgrounds, programs, and even professions with our policy maker and practitioner work.

We are working to diversify the pipeline of education policy and finance researchers. This is the third year of our pre-doctoral diversity fellowship program, through which we bring to the conference ten individuals from diverse backgrounds who are considering doctoral degrees in related fields. This program is intended to introduce these fellows to research and demystify the profession. This year, the pre-doctoral diversity fellowship was generously supported by the Walton Family Foundation.

We are also actively working to support and develop those who are already part of the education finance and policy community. Also supported by the Walton Family Foundation and in its ninth year, we have our policy maker and practitioner travel fellowships,

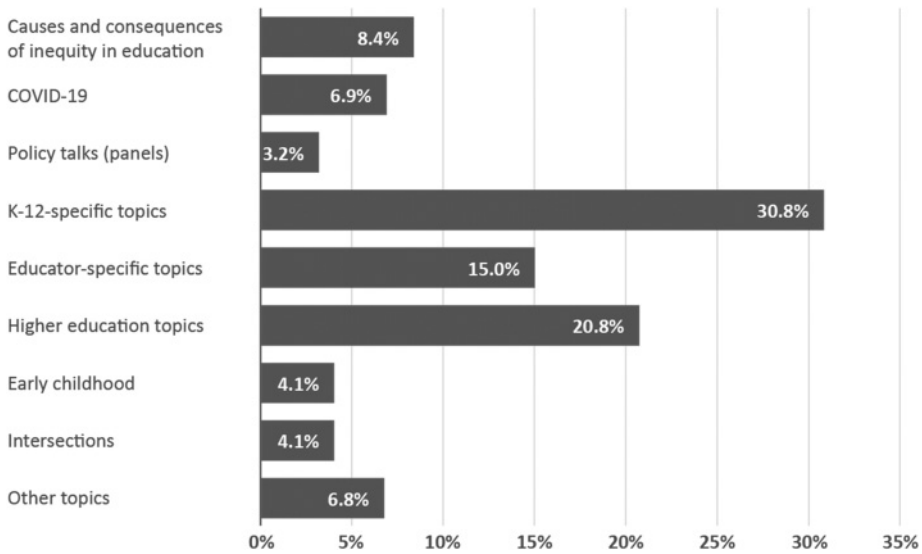


Figure 1. Association for Education Finance and Policy Conference Papers by Topic, 2022

which have enabled a total of ninety policy makers and practitioners to come to AEFPP's annual conferences over the past nine years.

This is also our second year of our early career mentorship program, which is intended to support early career scholars from diverse backgrounds, who are first-generation scholars, and who join us from programs and universities that are not widely or typically well-represented in AEFPP.

And, under the leadership of Dominique Baker alongside colleagues from SREE, ASHE, and AERA, we have co-sponsored a series of workshops on critical quantitative methods, generously funded by the Gates Foundation.

And this is our first year of our community groups, which have been wildly successful, with hundreds of members from within AEFPP.

In a recent survey of community group members, the overwhelming majority of respondents told us that the community groups solidified their sense of belonging in the organization, noting that AEFPP is a “friendly,” “supportive,” “welcoming,” “open,” “nice,” and “inclusive” space. These words warm my heart—these words tell me that what we are doing is working to broaden our proverbial tent.

We are also working to include more research and researchers in our conference and membership, where diversity is noted by topic, discipline, and method. Here (figure 1) I'm showing you conference papers by topic area, noting that this is just the second year in which we have had a specific topic area for the causes and consequences of inequity in education—8 percent of this year's conference papers.

Here (figure 2) we have conference papers by methods this year: While the vast majority are quantitative, we do have 7 percent that use mixed methods and another 7 percent that are entirely qualitative.

Step three: Seeding the organization and relevant groups with committed individuals. We have for the first time created a board committee on justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI), with inaugural chair Dominique Baker. We had a unanimous

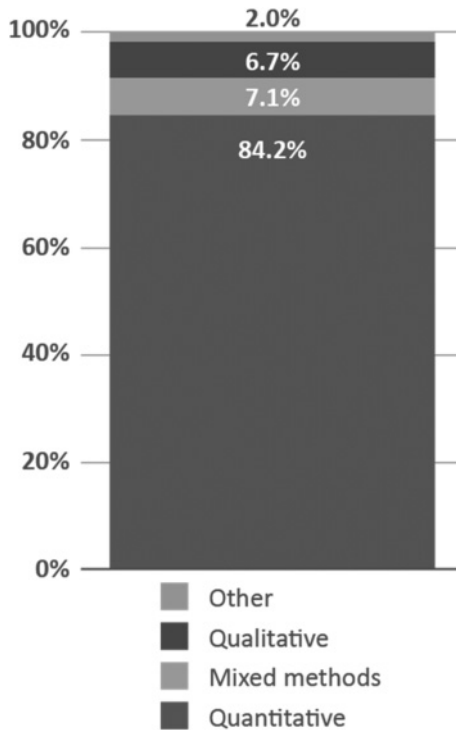


Figure 2. Methods Used in Association for Education Finance and Policy Conference Papers, 2022

board vote to establish the committee, and the executive committee for the board are all members. We have also asked all of the other board committees to conceive of JEDI in their work and to report their JEDI activities.

We are centering this in our work as an organization. And our members are stepping up in amazing ways. Anjali Adukia has done a tremendous job fostering the community groups, with dozens of hard-working, innovative community group co-chairs setting up programs and networking and Slack channels and other initiatives to help further these communities within AEF. Steven Hemelt and Lydia Ross are working hard on the early career mentoring, pre-doctoral diversity fellowship, and Policy maker and Practitioner initiatives. These are just a few of the many people who are devoting time and energy to making AEF an inclusive, welcoming place.

And now we are working on step four—collecting data, holding ourselves accountable, figuring out what’s working and what’s not, and where we need to go from here. This work is not easy, and if we are successful, it won’t be easy. But isn’t this the exact point? Many of us are scholars and educators. Isn’t it exactly our job to be curious? To want to learn new things? To want to answer a question that has plagued us? To solve problems? Isn’t it our job to be out of our comfort zones? To be uncomfortable?

We do it all the time—we start a new research project, we delve into a new literature or use a new method. We create partnerships between researchers and policy makers or practitioners so that we can tackle the tough questions, so that we can solve the problems that have seemed unsolvable. We continuously place ourselves at risk. We are used to this kind of intellectual, pragmatic discomfort. What I’m advocating for

is to allow ourselves to become uncomfortable in other ways—to purposely seek out conversations and collaborations and engagement with others who think differently, approach problems differently, and who have lived differently.

I'm proud of AEFPP. I'm proud of how we've gotten each other through the last two years, how we've strengthened existing bonds and created new ways to form community and support each other, and how we've continued to press on, using our skills to tackle problems of policy and practice to help improve education, even as we ourselves are struggling and exhausted and existing in this disequilibrium.

And I believe that by remaining a little uncomfortable—by choosing to live in the dissonance—this is how we will continue to be excellent, and how we can live AEFPP's mission to improve education policy so that all students have access to educational opportunities and are given the means to succeed in school and in their lives.

And I know we—you—are up to the task.

Thank you for taking the time to listen to me, and most of all, thank you for being valued members of our growing and diversifying AEFPP community.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank the entire AEFPP Board of Directors for their tireless work during the COVID-19 pandemic, and particularly for remaining committed to advancing justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion in our own organization and the larger field. Lydia Ross, AEFPP's Executive Director, has played a crucial role in supporting AEFPP's work in this area, and she deserves much credit. Dominique Baker and Lisa Koshkarian provided me with important feedback and support as I was developing and writing this presidential essay, and I owe them a debt of gratitude. Appreciation, as well, to Dan Goldhaber and Emily Mohr, for their consistent encouragement. And of course, all of my love and appreciation for Ryan, Bryce, and Cole for their unwavering support and understanding.

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