Toward a Transformative Approach to Equity

Celebrating Diversity (Heroes and Holidays)
Special diversity "programs" focus on surface-level and detached cultural artifacts, often based on generalizations or stereotypes. Equity is practiced as an international food fair or a celebration of a particular representative of a group. People experiencing inequity are expected to participate in celebrations of diversity while nobody attends to the inequities they're experiencing.

Cultural Competence
Diversity efforts revolve around studying generalized constructs of the "cultures" represented in the community. Professional development focuses on debunked notions like the "culture of poverty" or the "Asian learning style." Although it can be useful to understand common attributes of various cultures or, better yet, the individual cultures of people in an organization, this approach fails to consider how those individuals might be marginalized based on their identities. Racism, heterosexism, and economic injustice, if discussed at all, are mistakenly discussed as cultural conflicts rather than what they are: oppressions related to power, access, and opportunity.

Human Relations
Members of the community are encouraged to build relationships across group identities. "Diversity" and "community" initiatives often revolve around strengthening cross-group relationships or resolving interpersonal conflicts across difference. Meanwhile, they continue failing to respond to institutional and structural inequity.

Mitigating Equity
The focus shifts to equity, but only in a reactive sense. When inequities are identified, programs and initiatives are instituted to mitigate them, but the larger institutional conditions underlying the inequities are left unchanged. For example, in a high school in which upper-level STEM classes are filled disproportionately with men, a separate program for women interested in STEM might be created. This is a positive step, but it does not address the underlying sexism or equitably adjust overall institutional culture or practice. That leaves the bigger problem unsolved, but it also results in a missed opportunity to examine how the conditions underlying sexism in STEM might impact other aspects of the school.

Transformative Equity
A commitment to equity informs every aspect of institutional policy and practice at all times. Institutional leaders work consistently to identify inequities and to root racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, economic injustice, transphobia, and other oppressions out of the institution completely. Decision-making prioritizes the needs and rights of the most marginalized members of the community. The most active advocates of inequity within the institution are recognized as the institution's cultural core rather than at the margins of the institution.