



## *Special Issue: Inclusive Learning*

# Fostering Equity for LGBTQ+ Higher Education Learners With Intercultural Humility

**Samantha Winterberg**, MA, CNS, CHHC

*University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences, St. Augustine, Florida, United States*

**Michelle McCraney**, EdD

*Walden University, Minneapolis, Minnesota, United States*

**Contact:** *S.Winterberg@usa.edu*

## Abstract

Members of the LGBTQ+ community often face discrimination, harassment, and exclusion in academic settings, which can negatively impact their academic and personal success. Studies have shown that LGBTQ+ students are more likely to experience negative mental health conditions, drop out of school, and struggle to find employment after graduation. Cultural humility fosters diversity, equity, and inclusion, which is critical to ensuring an equitable educational experience for all students, particularly those from marginalized communities. Intercultural understanding is essential to develop cultural humility so that attitudes reflect empathy and tolerance of differences, including sexual or gender orientation variances or ambiguity. Understanding how the power embedded in cultural climate marginalizes some while privileging others is vital to achieving equity.

**Keywords:** *intercultural, DEI, inclusivity, gender-specific pronouns, multicultural, LGBTQ+, equitable, cultural humility, education*

**Date Submitted:** April 13, 2023 | **Date Published:** July 29, 2023

## Recommended Citation

Winterberg, S., & McCraney, M. (2023). Fostering equity for LGBTQ+ higher education learners with intercultural humility. *Journal of Educational Research and Practice*, 12(0), 103–112.  
<https://doi.org/10.5590/JERAP.2022.12.0.07>

## Introduction

The concept of cultural humility is often misunderstood as cultural competency. Cultural competence refers to the ability of individuals or organizations to interact effectively with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. It involves understanding and respecting the beliefs, values, and customs of different cultural groups and adapting communication and behavior to appropriately engage with individuals from those groups. It also assumes that being culturally competent is a finite outcome. Cultural humility refers to an

ongoing process of self-reflection and learning that requires individuals to continuously challenge their biases and assumptions. This entails being open to new perspectives and ways of being in the world with a willingness to learn and grow in one's understanding of different cultures and ways of life. In this discussion, competence and humility are both valued as fundamental to equity achievement in higher education.

To achieve equity-centered paradigms, academic stakeholders must actively work to deconstruct power and privilege dynamics that foster inequity and injustice, including those based on systemic issues of racism, sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia. In 2022, findings from the Education Data Initiative report on college enrollment and student demographic statistics revealed that 66.6% of college students are 24 years of age and younger (Hanson, 2022). As of 2020, there were 12.8 million American 18- to 24-year-olds enrolled in college or graduate school and a nationwide total of 19.36 million postsecondary students. With nearly 20 million minds open to witness, experience, and adapt to the college culture, learners, faculty, community, and academic leadership share a responsibility to model a culturally sensitive and inclusive climate.

A culturally competent and sensitive academic climate is vital for the well-being of our college students. Literally, it can be a matter of life and death. Suicide is the second leading cause of death for people 18–24 years old, according to the CDC (Weaver, 2021). In a recent survey by the Trevor Project, results found that “While 46 percent of students without access to mental health services said they had seriously considered suicide and 22 percent said they had attempted suicide within the past year, those rates were 32 percent and 6 percent, respectively, among students with access to such services” (Alonso, 2022, para 4). LGBTQ+ students are disproportionately impacted by suicidality and are “more than four times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight, cisgender peers” (Weaver, 2021, para 1). Healthcare professionals will continue to be inadequately prepared to provide responsive care if the educational opportunities for students to become culturally competent are lacking (Singer, 2015). Inclusive educative practices have an impact beyond graduation. It is, therefore, crucial for universities to actively promote a culture of inclusivity and support for LGBTQ+ individuals through strategies, policies, and practices that address discrimination, provide resources, and encourage a welcoming and accepting campus environment. By acknowledging and addressing these concerns, we can work toward creating a more equitable and inclusive higher education system for all students. We begin by clarifying how intercultural awareness is understood and is necessary.

## **Intercultural Climate**

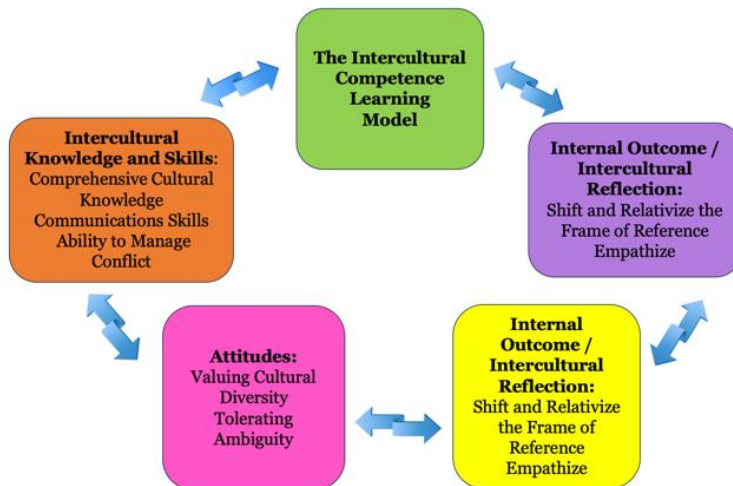
There is confusion about what comprises culture and where it originates. Culture has been understood in many academic settings as intercultural development; therefore, the focus in those settings has been on areas of international education, such as study abroad programs (Harvey et al., 2021). This distinction can create confusion when so much attention is made about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) through efforts to obtain multicultural sensitivity. Uncertainty and hesitancy can result if intercultural awareness is understood as a substitute for “other countries.”

Part of the difficulty in understanding cultural climate is recognizing this definition's scope and its membership's accountability. Landers and Kapadia (2017) opine equality, individualism, informality, and immediate gratification constitute core values in the United States. These notions of culture can clash with conflicting ideologies shared within other cultures and can clash with the concept of intercultural inclusivity. Exposed to a global marketplace, academic endeavors to recruit and retain multicultural employees and students require sensitivity to intercultural uniqueness. The elimination of ethnocentric biases and redefinition of culture in the context of higher education positions the institution as the foundational entity, with the constituents existing within that larger designation. A university culture, by this definition, could comprise institution missions, values, branding, hiring practices, programs, personnel, learners, subpopulations, and intersectional identities of those personnel and students, special interest groups, clubs,

and so on. The institution is accountable to its members as well as the integration of development, protection, and advancement of the social system in which it is also a participant.

An expanded understanding of intercultural suggests that learning involves developing one's capacity to communicate and engage effectively and appropriately across various cultural differences, including differences in gender, socioeconomic status, religion, ability, and sexual orientation, among others (Harvey et al., 2021). Universities should not limit their DEI efforts to only international education and study abroad programs, but they should also address domestic cultural issues, including those related to health and educational contexts of LGBTQ+ learners. It is important for faculty to create a safe and inclusive learning environment for all students by incorporating intercultural understanding into their teaching practices. Havril's (2015) definition and model of the intercultural competency pyramid (depicted in Figure 1) outlines the requisite attitudes, knowledge, comprehension, and desired internal and external outcomes of intercultural competence, including an understanding of and respect for LGBTQ+ identities.

**Figure 1.** *The Intercultural Competence Learning Model*



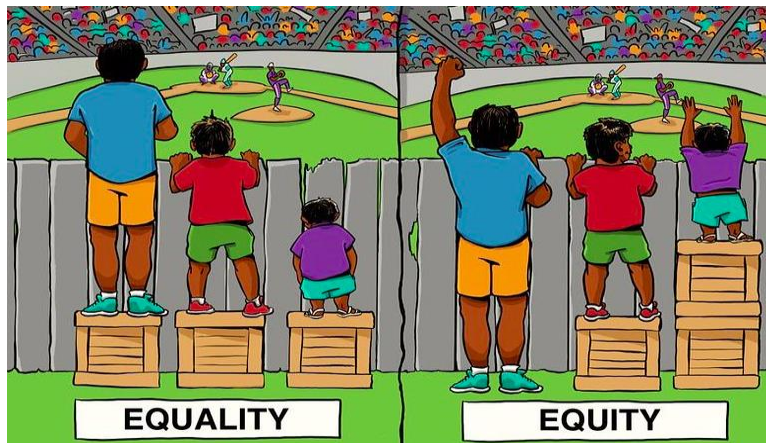
*Note:* Adapted from Havril, A. K. (2015). Improving intercultural competence of female university students in EFL within Saudi Arabia. *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 192, 554–566. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.06.091>

Intercultural experiences do not always promote positive learning, so it is essential to remember that knowledge alone is not enough for intercultural competence. When we talk about knowledge as an ingredient in intercultural competence, we refer to the importance of a solid understanding of different cultures, ways of life, and social structures. This knowledge can help individuals navigate cross-cultural interactions with greater ease and sensitivity. It is also important to note that simply knowing is not enough—individuals also need to be open-minded and willing to challenge their biases and assumptions; hence, maintaining cultural humility. Simply gaining knowledge can also lead to wrong conclusions and other problems. It is possible for individuals to have a great deal of knowledge about different cultures but still hold on to their own biases and assumptions, which can hinder their ability to interact with people from different backgrounds effectively. Those with cultural power may fail to recognize their privileges and how these privileges impact their interactions within diverse communities, which is why it is essential for individuals to engage in ongoing self-reflection and learning to identify and challenge their biases and assumptions and to work toward greater intercultural understanding and cultural humility.

## Equity Not Equality

Equality and equity are two related but distinct concepts that are often used interchangeably but have different meanings and implications. Equality refers to the idea of treating everyone the same regardless of differences in their backgrounds, abilities, or circumstances. It involves providing equal access to opportunities, resources, and services and treating everyone impartially. As depicted in Figure 2, equity recognizes and addresses differences in the needs, challenges, and circumstances of different individuals or groups and involves providing resources and support in a way that takes into account the specific needs and challenges, rather than treating everyone the same. In other words, equality is about sameness, while equity is about fairness, which may require distribution of resources accordingly to achieve equal results. For example, suppose an academic institution fully embraces an equitable intercultural climate. In this case, the transition to new perspectives, policies, protections, and practices for equity is projected from a lens of tolerance, empathy, and cultural humility. For this to occur, the definition of culture must broaden to embody equality and equity as different but intersected mechanisms. If equality results from equity-focused campaigns, one could perceive that equity mediates equality, or perhaps they are bidirectionally predictive. However, offering everyone the same treatment or resources does not create equity.

**Figure 2.** *Equality and Equity*



*Note:* Interaction Institute for Social Change | Artist: Angus Maguire. [interactioninstitute.org](https://interactioninstitute.org) and [madewithangus.com](https://madewithangus.com). <https://interactioninstitute.org/illustrating-equality-vs-equity/>

Imagine a scenario where there are two students in a classroom, one of whom identifies as LGBTQ+. If the course curriculum lacks LGBTQ+ narratives, case studies, simulations, or any affirming content, the LGBTQ+ student may feel excluded or invalidated. Equal opportunity to engage in course activities for both students is evidenced, but equity is not. Providing materials that include diverse representation and affirm LGBTQ+ identities would be equitable treatment, as it takes into account the individual needs and circumstances of this student. It creates inclusion. Understanding the difference between these concepts is important for creating more just and equitable learning environments.

### **An E.Q.U.I.T.A.B.L.E. Framework**

By utilizing the E.Q.U.I.T.A.B.L.E. [empathy, query, understand, initiate, temper, apply, believe, lead, and educate] framework, as shown in Figure 3, academics can take the first steps toward creating a more diverse, inclusive, equitable, and safe university environment. This can be achieved through modeling behaviors and language that promote equity. Implementing policy changes can also help ensure positive equity for LGBTQ+ issues in the curriculum and foster understanding and best practices in the learning community. It is

important to note that these strategies are not exhaustive and can be adapted to fit individual needs and situations.

**Figure 3:** *E.Q.U.I.T.A.B.L.E. Framework*



*Note:* The authors developed this infographic to inspire an equitable level of attention for sexual-orientated and gender-identified minoritized learners.

*Empathy* is an emotional construct necessitated by its social context. Kierkegaard, best known for his existential philosophy, regarded both teacher and student as learners, stating, “instruction begins when you, the teacher, learn from the learner, put yourself in his place so that you may understand what he understands and in the way he understands it” (Adams, 2021, p. 263). Communities that offer sources of connection and acceptance infused with genuine empathy can mitigate the negative impact of microaggressions, discrimination, and bias. Collective belonging, particularly for members of marginalized groups, may amplify awareness and empathy for those subjected to oppression and discrimination (Marchiondo et al., 2021). Evidence suggests that incorporating role-playing and simulations with LGBTQ+ subject material can enhance empathy toward LGBTQ+ learners. Professional development training can markedly increase instructor empathy for LGBTQ+ challenges (Paterson et al., 2019).

*Query* addresses implicit bias and mental reservations that prevent empathy. Inquiry requires living in the spirit of openness, curiosity, and respect, increasingly mindful of what exists within us that restricts our willingness to stay with our experiences as they unfold (Borysenko, n.d.). *Understanding* urges reflection of homophily [alignment with sameness] as a barrier to compassionate empathy. Chun opines that homophily in the form of segregation lies at the conceptual core of connection. “Homophily reveals and creates boundaries within theoretically flat and diffuse networks ... it is a tool for discovering bias and inequality and for perpetuating it [bias and inequity] in the name of ‘comfort,’ predictability, and common sense” (2018, p. 62). Research suggests that without cultural shifts, some fields with strong homophily [engineering, nursing] will never reach parity, and high levels of gender bias in other areas [academic chemistry, math, computer science] will always prevent parity at the highest levels of leadership (Clifton et al., 2019). *Initiate* offers practical application of inclusive policy shifts for LGBTQ+ faculty and staff. Institutional equity must be an all-inclusive mission free of tokenism and hollow inclusivity initiatives. Gay men and women are disproportionately represented among professors (Flaherty, 2016), and the institutional culture should protect and encourage diversity among staff as well as students. *Temper* explores microaggressive behaviors and by-standing that perpetuate structural stigma for LGBTQ+. Lack of cultural sensitivity or unrecognized biases further

marginalize sexual and gender minorities. *Apply* explains how different types of empathy emerge from mental connectedness. If we desire to be more equitable, we must recognize the cognitive and affective mechanisms at play and how these phenomena are constructed. *Believe* examines the current disposition of American democratic principles related to education that disunites America instead of strengthening the bonds of connection, mutuality, intellectual diversity, goals for learning, curricula, and the ethos of the institution. These are the bonds integral to an equitable society. *Lead* accentuates the tasks of equitable leadership and repurposes conventional ideas of power away from the dominant few and toward a more participatory community. Each individual can use their strengths to contribute to equitable climates because leadership is a function of listening, learning, engaging, and implementing what constituents need. All of our voices matter. Inclusivity is an equity strategy that requires the participation of all stakeholders regardless of the type of power they wield. The greatest drivers of inclusion are leadership and integration. *Educate* reinforces the urgent need for equity from a social, ethical, and aspirational stance. As with each piece of the framework, *Empathy* fluidly weaves through to fortify the vitality of equitable resources, policies, and practices.

### Equitable Course Room Practices

As educators, our pronoun choices satisfy formal linguistic usage. Still, they also reflect sociolinguistic concerns, particularly as the discourse around pronouns also concerns issues of sexist and cis-centric language (Mott-Smith, 2022). In his recent book about the history and significance of pronouns, Baron writes, “The pronoun is becoming like an honorific, like a title. This is how you refer to me” (Heckel, 2020, para 5). Baron attests that the search for gender-neutral pronouns has been active since at least the late 18th century, despite what seems to be a contemporary cultural issue. Although the singular version of *they* has been used for centuries, more recently, usage of this pronoun has expanded as a way to attribute nonbinary gender identity (Arnold et al., 2021). According to Saguy and Williams (2022), the word *they* was looked up 313% more times in 2019 than in 2018. In 2019, the American Dialect Society voted for *they* as the word of the decade (Arnold et al., 2021), and based on a number of dictionary searches, Merriam-Webster selected *they* as the 2019 word of the year, then added the singular *they* to the online dictionary (Heckel, 2020). The use of pronouns is a way to promote a more inclusive environment. Pronouns are words that refer to either people talking or someone or something that is being talked about, such as he/she/they. Further, people in the United States know about gender-neutral pronouns, and 20% know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns in their practice (Saguy & Williams, 2022).

To inspire an equitable level of attention to sexual-oriented and gender-identified learners, faculty can use inclusive language as a best practice in their virtual learning communities. Using inclusive language and personal pronouns is easy to implement and may assist in setting expectations in valuing diverse viewpoints. Inclusive language can positively increase social and cultural diversity and reduce negative stereotypes (Steketee et al., 2021). Table 1 displays some examples of noninclusive words or phrases and suggestions for more inclusive words or statements. An effective way to establish an immediate connection with the learners is to ask what name they prefer to use in your class rather than using the legal name on the registration.

**Table 1.** *Noninclusive and More Inclusive Words or Statements*

<b>Noninclusive words or phrases</b>	<b>More inclusive words or statements</b>
biological/born female, female bodied	assigned female at birth (AFAB)
biological/born male, male bodied	assigned male at birth (AMAB)
female-to-male (FTM)	transgender man
homosexual, nonstraight	men who have sex with men, women who have sex with women, gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer
male-to-female (MTF)	transgender woman

sexual preference/identity, lifestyle choice	sexual orientation
transgender people and normal people	transgender people and cisgender people
gender nonconforming/neutral	gender nonbinary
both genders, opposite sexes	all genders
guys, girls, gals	everyone, all
husband, wife	spouse, partner
ladies and gentlemen	everyone, folks, honored guests
mother, father	parent

*Note:* This is a nonexhaustive list of noninclusive words or phrases and suggestions for more inclusive words and phrases.

People feel included when we adopt the correct words in conversation. The language we use can assist in building a stronger campus community and further our ability to thrive in an increasingly diverse environment. Personal pronouns matter, as assuming a person's gender may send a potentially harmful message. Using the correct pronouns shows respect for others and creates an inclusive environment. Include your personal pronouns to model inclusion in the classroom. In Table 2, there are examples of pronouns, their meanings, and examples of how to use them.

**Table 2.** *Pronouns, Meanings, and Examples*

<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>Meaning</b>	<b>Examples</b>
he/him/his	masculine pronouns	If Pat's gender pronouns are he/him/his, you could say, "Pat ate <i>his</i> soup because <i>he</i> was hungry."
she/her/hers	feminine pronouns	"Pat ate <i>her</i> soup because <i>she</i> was hungry."
they/them/theirs	neutral pronouns	"Pat ate <i>their</i> food because <i>they</i> were hungry."
ze/zir/zirs	neutral pronouns	"Pat ate <i>zir</i> soup because <i>ze</i> was hungry."
ze/hir/hirs	neutral pronouns	"Pat ate <i>hir</i> soup because <i>ze</i> was hungry."

*Note:* Examples of gender identity pronouns.

Using proper pronouns is important and essential. Compassionate empathy is a powerful tool for connection. According to Price (as cited by Alonso, 2022), director of the Trevor Project, "I think sometimes, colleges have this reputation of, 'Of course we're open, and of course, we're affirming, of course, we support LGBTQ+ people,' but I think it's important that they do everything they can to show that so that young people are not questioning if that is the case" (para 7). Students should not need to question if they will be treated unfairly because they are not in the majority. As Deardorff's (2006) model suggests, valuing cultural diversity promotes intercultural knowledge and skill that iteratively generates constructive interactions relative to empathy and internal reflection.

## Conclusion

How academic institutions embrace equity as culture influences how educational stakeholders develop cultural humility. Understanding a culture of equity demands the recognition that barriers for some individuals must be eliminated for equal distribution to yield equal results. Educational institutions must embody an equity-centered paradigm and work toward a more just and inclusive society where all members feel safe, valued, and supported. Establishing an inclusive culture in academia takes a community of care committed to recognizing the unique experiences of LGBTQ+ people. All academic personnel can affirm and

support students who identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. We are all critical stakeholders and can take small steps to make higher education equitable for all. The construct of an intercultural climate appeals to the power of empathy as the substrate for how cultural humility is achieved. Each piece of the E.Q.U.I.T.A.B.L.E. framework illustrates how construction of learning through an empathic lens can eventuate better academic and health outcomes for LGBTQ+ individuals.



## References

- Adams, M. (2021). An exploration of some connections between existentialism, education and psychotherapy teaching. *Existential Analysis*, 32(2), 262–277.
- Alonso, J. (2022). *Survey: Campus supports help save LGBTQ+ lives*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2022/09/29/mental-health-supports-reduce-suicidality-lgbtq-students>
- Arnold, J. E., Mayo, H. C., & Dong, L. (2021). My pronouns are *they/them*: Talking about pronouns changes how pronouns are understood. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, 28, 1688–1697. <https://doi.org/10.3758/s13423-021-01905-0>
- Borysenko, J. (n.d.). *The importance of inquiry*. <https://joanborysenko.com/spirituality/importance-inquiry/>
- Clifton, S. M., Hill, K., Karamchandani, A. J., Autry, E. A., McMahon, P., & Sun, G. (2019). Mathematical model of gender bias and homophily in professional hierarchies. *Cornell University Library*. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.1901.07600>
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10(3), 241–266.
- Flaherty, C. (2016, January 26). *Are academics disproportionately gay?* Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/01/26/study-suggests-faculty-members-are-disproportionately-likely-be-gay>
- Hanson, M. (2022, July 26). *College enrollment & student demographic statistics*. EducationData.org. <https://educationdata.org/college-enrollment-statistics>
- Harvey, R., Murphy, M. J., Bigner, J. J., & Wetchler, J. L. (Eds.). (2021). *Handbook of LGBTQ-affirmative couple and family therapy*. Routledge.
- Havril, A. K. (2015). Improving intercultural competence of female university students in EFL within Saudi Arabia. *Procedia—Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 192, 554–566. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.06.091>
- Heckel, J. (2020, January 29). *Tracing the history of gender-neutral pronouns*. Illinois News Bureau. <https://las.illinois.edu/news/2020-01-29/tracing-history-gender-neutral-pronouns>
- Landers, S., & Kapadia, F. (2017). The health of the transgender community: Out, proud, and coming into their own. *American Journal of Public Health*, 107(2), 205–206. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303599>
- Marchiondo, L. A., Verney, S. P., & Venner, K. L. (2021). Academic leaders' diversity attitudes: Their role in predicting faculty support for institutional diversity. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 16(3), 323–332. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000333>
- Mott-Smith, J. A. (2022). Dennis Baron: What's your pronoun? Beyond he & she. *Applied Linguistics*, 43(3), 603–606. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amaa059>
- Paterson, J. L., Brown, R., & Walters, M. A. (2019). Feeling for and as a group member: Understanding LGBT victimization via group-based empathy and intergroup emotions. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 58(1), 211–224. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjso.12269>
- Saguy, A. C., & Williams, J. A. (2022). A little word that means a lot: A reassessment of singular *they* in a new era of gender politics. *Gender & Society*, 36(1), 5–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432211057921>
- Singer, R. B. (2015). LGBTQ focused education: Can inclusion be taught? *International Journal of Childbirth Education*, 30(2), 17–19.

Steketee, A., Williams, M. T., Valencia, B. T., Printz, D., & Hooper, L. M. (2021). Racial and language microaggressions in the school ecology. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 16(5), 1075–1098. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691621995740>

Weaver, J. (2021, December 7). *Higher education institutions (HEIs) and crisis services*. The Trevor Project. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/blog/higher-education-institutions-heis-and-crisis-services/>



| JERAP

The *Journal of Educational Research and Practice* is a peer-reviewed journal that provides a forum for studies and dialogue about developments and change in the field of education and learning. The journal includes research and related content that examine current relevant educational issues and processes. The aim is to provide readers with knowledge and with strategies to use that knowledge in educational or learning environments. *JERAP* focuses on education at all levels and in any setting, and includes peer-reviewed research reports, commentaries, book reviews, interviews of prominent individuals, and reports about educational practice. The journal is sponsored by The Richard W. Riley College of Education and Human Sciences at Walden University, and publication in *JERAP* is always free to authors and readers.