Catherine Ross: Hello and welcome to Dead Ideas in Teaching and Learning, a higher education podcast from the Center for Teaching and Learning at Columbia. I'm Catherine Ross, the Center's Executive Director. Let's get started.

I'm speaking today with Dr. Frank Tuitt, Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer at the University of Connecticut. As a quick reminder to our listeners, in this podcast series, we explore dead ideas in teaching and learning, in other words, ideas that are widely believed though not true, and that drive many systems and behaviors in connection to teaching, exercising what Diane Pike called "the tyranny of dead ideas."

Dr. Franklin A. Tuitt, who has more than two decades of higher education experience, was named Vice President and Chief Diversity Officer at the University of Connecticut in July, 2020. Prior to his move to the University of Connecticut, Dr. Tuitt has been a member of the University of Denver faculty since 2004, and he became their Chief Diversity Officer and held that role from 2015 to 2019. Since September 2019, he has also been a Visiting Scholar at the Eco Center for Diversity Policy at the Hague, Netherlands. Dr. Tuitt is the Inaugural Visiting Scholar at the Echo Center and delivers lectures, facilitates training, and conducts research in support of diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in the Netherlands and to post-secondary institutions in Europe.

In 2019, Dr. Tuitt received the National Association of Chief Diversity Officers in Higher Education Individual Leadership Award in recognition of outstanding contributions to research administration, practice advocacy and/or policy, and whose work informs and advances understanding of diversity and inclusive excellence in higher education.

Dr. Tuitt also appears in our very own Columbia Center for Teaching and Learning Inclusive Teaching MOOCs, for which we are very grateful. Welcome to our Dead Ideas podcast, Frank. It's such a delight to have you here today.

Frank Tuitt: Thank you so much for the invitation and glad to be.

Catherine Ross: So I'll set the stage a little bit for our listeners - as I mentioned in the bio, Dr. Tuitt is an internationally renowned scholar and speaker in many areas that touch on diversity, equity, inclusion, and teaching and learning. Today, I've invited him to chat with me about some dead ideas related to the topic of anti-racist pedagogy.

For the purposes of this podcast, we will adopt the anti-racist pedagogy definition cited in our Center for Teaching and Learning resource, Anti-Racist Pedagogy in Action: First Steps. I quote, "anti-racist pedagogy is not about simply incorporating racial content into courses, curriculum, and discipline. It is also about how one teaches even in courses where race is not the subject matter. It begins with the faculty's awareness and self-reflection.
of their social position and leads to application of this analysis in their teaching.” End of quote. And this is from an article by Kishimoto in 2018.

With that short intro, I want to get right into the questions so that we can get Dr. Tuitt Talking here. So, I think that for some people in higher education, anti-racist pedagogy feels like a new thing, like a product of recent events which have prompted - as we all know - prompted a reckoning with systemic racism, calling into question practices in the academy. And yet anti-racist pedagogy has roots that are decades deep in the works of the pioneers that we all love - so like bell hooks, in her book, Teaching to Transgress; and Freire's work, Pedagogy of the Oppressed. And Frank, you wrote a book that was published in 2016, called Race, Equity and the Learning Environment: The Global Relevance of Critical and Inclusive Pedagogies in Higher Education, which talks about the ways that systemic racism appears in learning spaces.

So I'm just curious - does it feel like a new thing to you? Or is it finally just becoming, maybe, more visible and more separate from inclusive teaching? Is it different from inclusive teaching, or not? I'll let you go.

Frank Tuitt: Great question. And yes, I think the recent events and the recent reckoning has absolutely added new visibility to the anti-racist pedagogy and anti-racism work more broadly. You know, in my own work, I've been thinking about anti-racist pedagogy from the standpoint of how we center critical race pedagogy into the teaching and learning environment. And that's been a big part of my work probably for the last 15 years. So for me, it's not new, but there are a lot of terms that educators use interchangeably; culturally responsive teaching, and culturally relevant teaching, of course inclusive pedagogy. And they have a lot of similarities. What I tried to do with Inclusive Pedagogies was to really bring together a range of pedagogies from across a variety of disciplines and to use that as a way to conceptualize teaching that accounted for the diversity that exists within our learning environment.

So to me, inclusive pedagogy focuses on creating equity-affirming learning environments, and really thinking intentionally about how we create learning environments that empower our students to achieve at the highest levels.

Catherine Ross: Thank you for that. And I think also from the quote I read, in the definition, and I'm curious to see if this resonates with you - when we talk about anti-racist pedagogy, as opposed to say, inclusive pedagogy more broadly, I feel like there's more of a requirement for self-reflection and self-examination on the part of the instructor. Right? The identity piece becomes… I feel like it becomes more highlighted when we start talking about anti-racist pedagogy.

Frank Tuitt: Yeah, I would sort of order it this way - there's absolutely a focus on the individual, the instructor, as a key component of the learning environment. And how we show up in that space really determines our ability to generate anti-racists learning environments. Right? So it requires the hard work of looking inside, you know, who we are and what informs how we think about teaching and learning. The reality that many of us initially conceptualize teaching based on the way we were taught, and given the lack of diversity we had when I was a student in high school, teaching tended to look a particular
way. And so much of my early work sort of grew out of my own experiences as a graduate student and an undergrad in environments where it was rare to see race centered in ways that were asset-based as opposed to deficit based. And it really sort of triggered for me a need to figure out alternative ways to conceptualize the learning environment.

[00:07:59] And as I moved from thinking about it to doing it, I had to pay attention to - what does it mean to show up in the classroom? The way I do, how I look. And I often talk about going to the University of Denver for the first time and realizing that many of my students hadn't had, sort of, real life, concrete interactions in a learning environment with someone who looked like me, and what I showed up as an instructor matter to them. And I had to really think about the individual, myself, as a part of the content.

[00:08:34] Catherine Ross: Right, right. I think that's really powerful. And it's a story I've heard from others as well, who encountered the academy and use that personal experience to inform how they taught and how they interacted with their students in their classes. So thank you for that.

[00:08:56] So, of course being that this is the Dead Ideas podcast, I have to ask you what dead ideas you encounter while you're doing all this work to make changes that align with anti-racist and inclusive teaching stances? You know, both individual instructors, but also schools and institutional level dead ideas that you run into.

[00:09:21] Frank Tuitt: So I have a couple of thoughts on this question, which is a great question. The first one that came to mind is that anti-racist pedagogy is only for students of color, right? So the only reason we would do this is to support students of color. And that's the farthest thing from the truth, right? We learned a long time ago that many of the practices we're talking about often align with what we have come to understand as "best practices" for all students in the learning environment. My thinking about this sort of got strengthened, as I realized, when we don't engage in anti-racist, inclusive, equitable forms of teaching; students who have been historically marginalized can often be further disadvantaged by that. But when we are intentional about integrating anti-racist practices into the teaching and learning environment, we create opportunities for all students to feel seen, validated, and have the ability to achieve at the highest levels.

[00:10:23] Catherine Ross: That's a really good one. Are there any others that come to mind?

[00:10:28] Frank Tuitt: Yeah, I'll just add, it's also not a tool that's only available to faculty of color, right? So it's not just a focus on students of color that anyone can utilize anti-racist pedagogy, or anti-racist pedagogical practices - back to our earlier conversation. However, the important self work has to be done in order to do it well. Because if we're not preparing ourselves, building our capacity to deliver - we can create more harm than good. And so it's important to remember, anyone can do this. My goal, as I speak to colleagues around the world about anti-racists and inclusive teaching practices, is to expand the choir, to get more people engaged.

[00:11:12] And as we know, the choir also needs practice. One of the things I've been thinking about, related to dead ideas, is this notion that anti-racist pedagogy requires watering
down standards, or weakening the learning environment. And this is the farthest thing from being the case. I challenge folks to talk to any of my students who I've had the privilege of teaching over the many years, and they will quickly talk about it being some of their most challenging experiences.

[00:11:40] And so anti-racist pedagogy is not about watering down the learning environment, or holding students to lesser standards. It's really about pushing students to achieve at the highest levels, and doing it in ways that support their growth and development. So that's, that's another one.

[00:11:58] Then one last one I'll offer here, and this tends to be at the structural level; that anti-racist pedagogy is only relevant for certain disciplines and not all disciplines, right? And we know that all disciplines rely on pedagogy, right? As a form of constructing knowledge or facilitating learning. And so anti-racist pedagogy can and should be a part of all disciplines. Wherever we have real, live human beings, and we're engaging them, anti-racist pedagogy should be a consideration, and how we construct and design learning environments.

[00:12:37] Catherine Ross: Yes, yes, and yes! I am so glad you brought those up - they're such powerful dead ideas. The second one that you were talking about, about this idea that somehow this is coddling, or giving students something that's easier to accomplish, is so endemic. I think in many people's responses, and it runs into the dead ideas that are often encountered in the academy around what rigor means - what is academic rigor? And how is it defined? And it's often defined very narrowly. And this causes people to think that if you change these things, that somehow it's not just that you're making it equitable, it's that you're somehow making it easier.

[00:13:30] Frank Tuitt: The other part of what you're referencing here, which I think is important to highlight, not only the rigor, but the ways in which we measure success. So I think we have to really think about the various forms of assessment, what we use to understand learning, to measure learning. And make sure we're not using tools and templates that are also biased in ways that we're unaware of, right?

[00:13:55] Catherine Ross: Right. And designed to weed students out, instead of to help them learn and succeed. Let's just say that.

[00:14:04] Frank Tuitt: Thank you. Thank you for bringing that right to the point.

[00:14:08] Catherine Ross: All right. So what do you think are some things that individual instructors can do to create equitable learning opportunities for their students? And in what ways do universities maybe need to change? Or just think about how they could support those efforts?

[00:14:27] Frank Tuitt: Yeah. So let's, let's start with individual. We've talked about the hard self work that's necessary, but I think, and I often say this; anti-racist pedagogy can't be something you think about once you've had a situation in a classroom, right? You've had a teachable moment that didn't go as well as you would've liked and now you want to turn to anti-racist pedagogy. It's kind of like adding an ingredient - right? - after you've already baked the cake, as we like to say. Right? So you can't go back once the cake is done and add
something that you forgot to include. So we have to start thinking about into racist pedagogy from the very beginning of our conceptualization of the learning environment, right? So that's one thing.

[00:15:10] And then we have to think about how we're creating learning environments that honor multiple perspectives, that allow all of our students to be validated by sharing their cultural experiences. Individual structures need to look at the curriculum and review the curriculum for hidden forms of oppressions such as stereotyping and inaccurate generalizations, historical omissions - and make the appropriate changes.

[00:15:36] And I think for me, a big part of my approach to anti-racist pedagogy is creating learning environments where we demonstrate our care for our students and honor their desires and expectations for a more socially just world and society and institution. Thinking about the reality that many of our students are committed to engaging in activities that produced change, and growth, and development. At the institutional level, we have to align our reward systems with our desires for more anti-racists and inclusive learning environments. Currently, there's a huge disconnect in the ways in which we evaluate teaching and learning at the individual classroom level; the ways in which we build it into the promotion and tenure process; the ways in which we distribute merit and other ways of acknowledging the importance of this work - institutions need to begin to make those shifts so there's greater alignment in those various areas.

[00:16:40] Catherine Ross: Oh, I'm so happy to hear you identify that. That is such a systemic barrier to the kind of change that we're both endorsing - you sound like you're working in a teaching center! I have to say, we are definitely in the same choir here, I think.

[00:17:00] Frank Tuitt: Well to that point, I think one of the things that's been great, is in my role as a Chief Diversity Officer, one of my strongest partners is our Center for Teaching and Learning. And so we're thinking constantly collaboratively about how to advance this work in ways that is sustainable.

[00:17:19] Catherine Ross: Right, right, and that will be recognized and valued enough for instructors to feel like they can engage in this work, to your point. I also was very happy to hear you talk about caring about students. That's another kind of dead idea; it's a legacy idea in the academy that students come in just with what one person I interviewed talked about as "brains on sticks," and there's no emotion there, or personhood there that needs to be acknowledged and cared about. And it's certainly something that came out very strongly when I spoke with Laura Rendón about her ideas that were laid out in her book, and she's the one who first helped me really see all those dead ideas that are really so deeply embedded in the legacies - as you said earlier - of how people were taught. And thinking that that's just normal, and that's just how you do it.

[00:18:21] So, I know that this conversation so far has just touched on a very few of the ideas that are in your work, and your work is extensive. So I wanted to make sure that I could ask you if there were other things you wanted to share with our listeners?

[00:18:38] Frank Tuitt: Yeah, a couple of things. One, we can't engage in anti-racist pedagogical practices without centering race. And so, even in some of the initial attempts I've
seen to transform pedagogy in light of recent incidents - there's still some uncomfortableness around centering race in concrete, tangible ways. And so it sounds pretty basic, but we can't engage in anti-racist pedagogical practices without centering race - our own as well as our students'. So that's an important piece.

The other piece, that we don't often talk about as much, is that there is a significant amount of emotional labor required to do this, to do it well. And we can also be extremely hard on ourselves when it doesn't go as planned. And I think we have to become more comfortable giving ourselves grace, and giving others grace to learn and grow and to sometimes realize that we're not always going to get it right. And I tell folks all the time - I've been thinking about this, at least for 20 plus years, and I have the privilege of being able to teach, even though I went over to the dark side. And so I still learn from every group of students that I come in contact with in the classroom, and I still don't always get it right. I take comfort in the fact that there's a larger goal here that I'm committed to, and always trying to refine the craft of teaching. So being aware of the emotional labor, and also giving ourselves grace when we don't, you know, reach the goals and aspirations we have for ourselves and our students at the institutional level.

I also think we haven't been good at recognizing the emotional labor, or the disproportionate amount of emotional labor, we ask minoritized faculty to engage in, in the sake of advancing anti-racist pedagogy. And so, I'll just give you a concrete example, and it's something that we learned from at my institution - was, you know, we tried to be responsive and made resources available to help faculty who were interested in enhancing their teaching to better align with anti-racist practices. And we sort of made the resources available through our traditional calls for proposals and grant-sor of protocols, and this had the unintended consequence of saying to the folks who are already doing this, that what they were doing was not as important, and that we are now really focusing on the people who haven't been doing it to provide resources to them.

I was fortunate enough to be working with a provost who really cared about this particular issue and we had the opportunity to be one of the first universities to create an anti-black racism course at an institutional level. And we've had thousands of students, faculty and staff go through that course now. And typically the creators of a course like that, would do that under the banner of service to the institution. And we realize that that was just exploiting the expertise that we have within our midst, and that they needed to be compensated for this additional labor. And we were able to do that, right? So that was a required shift, to not only acknowledge the labor, but to acknowledge the expertise that they were bringing to an institutional priority.

Catherine Ross: That is so powerful. It's amazing that you saw that as quickly as you did and I'm so happy to hear that you had the support you needed to act on that. Because that is...

Frank Tuitt: Very important.

Catherine Ross: Yeah, yeah. That's huge. I was also struck by - when you were talking about this process instructors have to engage with - and there is a kind of vulnerability there, right? Which is very hard for people who aren't used to being vulnerable in academic
spaces where there's no room for ever feeling like you don't know something. So that's a pretty scary place for people to go. And then if there's the added pressure of, it doesn't always go right. And you have evaluations systems that aren't aligned with allowing for this process and this vulnerability. It makes it hard for us to engage instructors, especially instructors who may be more at risk with those evaluations, you know - lecturers or adjuncts whose entire career can hinge on getting a good student rating on their course, right?

[00:23:39] Frank Tuitt: Absolutely. And I appreciate you mentioning those within the faculty ranks who may be - I'll frame it this way - less protected by the current systems and structures. I also become concerned about the faculty who choose to engage in anti-racist practices and experience student resistance and how that gets utilized in the promotion and tenure process, for example, or in the annual review process. We're saying at one hand that this is a priority for the institution, and when our faculty engage in that hard work and deliver on that project and students resist - in a way that student often do - that feedback then it's used to punish faculty who were doing things we asked them to do in the first place.

[00:24:31] Catherine Ross: Right, exactly, which is something I've been trying to probe and push through these dead ideas conversations, because there has to be that institutional alignment with all of our processes or it just makes it much harder - people like you doing this work, but also for the instructors who want to do this work but maybe have that fear.

[00:24:56] So, speaking of these challenges, what keeps you inspired and motivated to believe in the possibility of change? You've been doing this work a long time.

[00:25:10] Frank Tuitt: Yeah. I had the privilege of teaching a class this past semester and - so that's the first thing I point to - when I see what we're able to do, how we're able to create learning environments that inspire students to think about the world differently than they've experienced it, and to identify potential solutions to some of the challenges that plague us on a daily basis. So that motivates me. I think about the power of anti-racist pedagogy, and its ability to unleash the emancipatory imagination of our students, right? And so I get so energized from those encounters and the ability to see in students things that I never imagined could be possible, right? And so that is perhaps the biggest thing for me.

[00:26:11] The second thing is, and this is probably not as positive as what I just shared, but it's the reality - that many of our students do remain in environments that have a way of invalidating them, sending messages that they don't belong, that they're not worthy. And so the reality of that existence also motivates me to want to continue to advance this work. For some of our students, our classrooms can be hostile learning environments, and anti-racist pedagogy is one way to address that.

[00:26:52] Catherine Ross: Yes. So it's the students, basically, it's the generations coming up. That's so interesting because that's exactly what Laura Rendon also said; she's very much said that the work still looms. We've all been working for this change for so many years, but she said we haven't failed. We have the next generation and we've helped them, we've helped them start to take steps. And some of the work is going to be up to them to continue it. And yours resonated very much with me around that same kind of idea, that it's the students who are going to step up, and step into, some of this change work.
Frank Tuitt: Yeah. If you look at many of the folks I've been fortunate to work with, many of them are my former students who have taken this work around anti-racist pedagogy to levels I never dreamed of. So, I think of Taylor Hayes Davidson at Texas A&M and the work she's doing; Shevon Stewart is here at UConn is doing amazing work. I collaborated with both of them on the Race in the Learning Environment project; a former student, Raquel Wright-Mair, who's at Rowan University and doing amazing around pedagogy and faculty development. So that also keeps me motivated, and in some ways begins to create the space for me to move on to other things. You have super talented folks who've been able to take some of the ideas that you presented to them, and take them to a higher level. So that's another motivating factor in this space for me.

Catherine Ross: Yes. Your legacy, that is now showing itself - that's just so wonderful to hear that you're seeing that already. That's great.

I can't thank you enough, Frank, for taking the time to talk to us today. This has been such an amazing conversation for me personally, and I think it will be for our listeners as well. And just so appreciative of your efforts to move higher ed to a better place for everyone. So, thank you.

Frank Tuitt: Well, thank you, Catherine. It's helpful to have allies and collaborators like you creating space for this important work to be shared more broadly.

The last thing I'll offer - I feel like it's taken some really horrible events and incidents to bring anti-racism work, more broadly, to be front and center. It's here. And it requires folks like you, and others I've had the opportunity to talk to, to keep the light on it, and for it to be able to reach as many people as possible. Thank you. Thank you for doing that important work.

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