

BLACK LIVES MATTER:
MOVING BEYOND D&I

**THE COVID-19 SCAPEGOATING
OF ASIAN AMERICANS**

**MENTAL HEALTH: TAKING
CARE OF OUR TEAMS**

INCLUSION

*Creating Globally
Inclusive &
Culturally
Competent
Workplaces*

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**SIMMONS
UNIVERSITY'S**

**SUSAN
MACKENTY
BRADY**

**Leading the Charge on Implementing
Inclusive and Equitable Practices**



Susan MacKenty Brady

CEO, Simmons University Institute for Inclusive Leadership

Susan MacKenty Brady is the Deloitte Ellen Gabriel Chair for Women and Leadership at Simmons University—the first chief executive officer of the Simmons University Institute for Inclusive Leadership, which produces game-changing solutions for the purpose of intersecting leadership, equity, and inclusion.

Brady, who has been featured on ABC's *Good Morning America*, is the author of *Mastering Your Inner Critic and 7 Other High Hurdles to Advancement: How the Best Women Leaders Practice Self-Awareness to Change What Really Matters* (McGraw-Hill, November 2018) and *The 30-Second Guide to Coaching Your Inner Critic* (Linkage, 2014).

As a celebrated speaker and executive coach, she educates and ignites leaders globally on fostering a mind-set of inclusion and self-awareness.

Prior to joining Simmons, Brady worked at Linkage, Inc., where she founded the Women in Leadership Institute and launched a global consulting practice on advancing women leaders. She also led Linkage's field research behind the "7 Leadership Hurdles Women Leaders Face in the Workforce."

Dedicated to inclusively and collaboratively inspiring every girl to realize her full potential, Brady serves on the board of the not-for-profit Strong Women, Strong Girls. She lives in the Boston area with her husband, two teenage daughters, and two Portuguese Water Dogs.

Inclusion: How has COVID-19 changed your perspective and your work?

Susan MacKenty Brady: COVID-19 has ignited the need for managers and leaders to have an entirely higher level of conscious awareness, relational and emotional expertise, change agency, and skillful dialogue. In addition, pre-existing structures of racism and inequity have been amplified by the global health crisis. How best do we manage our own and others' accountability remotely? The pandemic has slowed many of us down—save frontline workers—and while the inequities brought to light by the slowing down of the world have been here all along, not all of us have had to face their existence until now.

Seeing many organizational cultures go from one extreme (must have in-office face time) to another (work from home) has

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— Dr. Lynn Perry Wooten,
President of Simmons
University



created an entirely new set of organizational and managerial challenges—ones that create the very real risk that women and other underrepresented populations are left behind. Knowing how to ensure the work environment is optimal for all who need to work is part of every leader's job.

COVID-19 has magnified that leadership is needed everywhere, and to lead effectively today will require extra attention to specific leadership skills. There are very real consequences to our collective prosperity if we don't equip leaders with the tools needed for success.

IN: What does it mean to lead inclusively?

SMB: Leading inclusively is a moment-to-moment practice. Needed changes won't occur if we can't tolerate feelings of vulnerability or practice the art of sincere curiosity. Inclusion requires self-awareness. It requires deep listening. It requires introspection. It requires respect for differences seen and unseen. It requires the willingness to constantly grow and learn. My colleague and our institute's practice area Vice President of Allyship and Inclusion Elisa van Dam and I recently unveiled

the six practices that make up The Work of the Inclusive Leader. In it, we point out that “the Work of the Inclusive Leader™ isn't a linear path. Instead, through continuous learning and action, leaders incorporate each new practice while continuing to engage in the previous practices.” The truth is we are all learning. I could be pretty advanced in my awareness about the sponsorship of women of color while fairly unaware of my biases about people with specific disabilities. At its core, becoming an inclusive leader is about returning to a place of respect for self and others. It is a return—and not a constant state—because as humans with feelings, we get triggered. We have opinions. We have unconscious knee-jerk responses. The name of the game is to return to our best self. Our best usually isn't when we are self-righteous and indignant or lacking in curiosity or communicating when we are flooded with anger, or when we jump to conclusions. Our best usually isn't when we are consumed with thoughts or feelings about how we're not good enough or don't quite measure up. Our best is when we feel open, interested, and okay in our own skin. It isn't possible to lead inclusively or foster cultures of inclusion if we aren't intentional about *being* in ways that inspire others to be it too.

IN: Has the onset of COVID-19 and its impact on the economy made it more challenging to implement diversity, equity, and inclusion learning both at the university and for the executives participating in the Institute for Inclusive Leadership?

SMB: At the university level, President Lynn Perry Wooten has voiced her strong commitment to advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the Simmons community. She has established a team of senior Presidential Advisers on Diversity as well as a new Diversity Council to help advance DEI learning and initiatives in the midst of a pandemic and beyond. Equity was one of our guiding principles this year as we planned for our semester during the global crisis. Certainly, we recognize that equitable access to education has become more challenging due to COVID. The faculty have worked tirelessly this year to bring 300 undergraduate classes fully



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online so students can continue to stay on track until we can resume classroom instruction.

At the Institute for Inclusive Leadership, we were lucky in that we were already positioned to offer rich and meaningful virtual learning experiences—meeting leaders where they were at, through online micro-courses. Leaders today at all levels are tackling some of the toughest leadership challenges, such as cultivating emotional intelligence, fostering diversity, leading inclusively, and embracing allyship. The institute was positioned to design and deliver on this before COVID-19 hit, and because the pandemic made virtual learning part of our everyday lives, it has fast-tracked the online learning curve in a way that can only be seen as impressive.

It is wonderful to align the university’s DEI work and commitment with the institute’s as we consider the most effective approaches to create inclusive campus communities and inclusive workplaces. COVID has only made that more of an imperative.

IN: This summer, as a result of Black Lives Matter protests focused on police reform, there has been an increased focus on racial justice and equity in society and the workplace. What is Simmons doing to advance change, either in your organization or your community, or both?

SMB: Higher education has a deep responsibility to bring its education, research, and community service to bear in advancing social justice and equity in society. Simmons has a long history of leadership in this arena, and we are focused on the recruitment and the support of a truly diverse and inclusive community of students, faculty, and staff. This year we are delighted to welcome our most diverse first-year class in more than four decades. In addition, we have created THRIVE, a key partnership with Human Resources that has transformed how Simmons recruits, hires, and includes underrepresented employees from diverse backgrounds. This initiative has resulted in significant gains, with staff hires of color increasing from 27 percent in 2018 to 42 percent in 2019.

Related to inclusion and equity in higher education more broadly, President Wooten recently wrote a compelling essay in *Inside Higher Ed* about the concern she has that COVID threatens to take its greatest educational toll on low-income, first-generation, and minority students who are more likely to have their educational path disrupted.

She wrote, “Our mission as educators must be laser-focused on equitable, long-term student success: establishing smoother and more predictable paths to completion for a wider spectrum of students, and delivering a high-quality educational experience that encourages persistence and engagement. We have an opportunity to effect real change and drive toward a greater level of inclusion and student success in the aftermath of this pandemic—if only we have the will to do so.”

At the Institute for Inclusive Leadership, we are fortunate to have a dream team of strategic advisers who have been instrumental in setting the course for meaningful discussion and change in their organizations. We are facing tough questions internally at Simmons and helping organizations navigate their own

course—tough questions like “How have we been shaped by the forces of racism?” and “What does it mean to be white?”

There is urgency now in the workplace to help well-intended leaders of all identities learn how to be an ally. Taking the mystery out of allyship and what it means to lead inclusively is no longer a “good thing to do.” It is, as it always needed to be, mission critical. Simmons defines allyship as using a position of power and/or privilege to actively support and advocate for women and members of underrepresented groups. Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) need the support of organizations like ours to enact change—and the time is now to take action.

IN: Over the last few years there has been a great deal of excitement about artificial intelligence and machine learning in creating more inclusive workplaces. What do you see as the opportunities? How is your university using these technologies? What are some of the cautionary tales we need to be aware of?

SMB: Simmons University offers an undergraduate degree in computer science and graduate degrees in library and information systems. Dr. Marie desJardins, dean of the College of Organizational, Computational, and Information Sciences at Simmons, who is an expert in artificial intelligence and machine learning, says, “Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) provide innumerable opportunities for increasing access and inclusivity. Speech recognition and generation, ‘smart prosthetics,’ cognitive assistants, and telerobotics can enhance communication, mobility, and connectivity for people with disabilities. Intelligent scheduling systems, predictive modeling, and natural language processing can increase the effectiveness and coordination of diverse teams working together across time and space.”

The concerns in recent years about the biases that ML-driven systems can introduce because of limitations and biases in the underlying data are not unfounded. Dean desJardins offers examples, such as racial bias in face recognition, credit scoring, and medical diagnosis. However, she is quick to point out that the “understanding and awareness of these potential biases have also driven the development of AI-fueled systems for increasing diversity in job recruiting, identifying and reducing bias in hiring and promotion decisions, and measuring adverse impact of workplace practices and policies.”

Many leading technology organizations, like Dell Technologies and Cisco, support the Simmons Leadership Conference. Their commitment to diversifying the talent in

the tech industry is far reaching and includes attracting and advancing women and other underrepresented populations into STEM professions generally and into tech fields specifically. When the majority of coders represent one gender or remain unaware of their own biases, we can’t shift the root of the problem.

IN: What brought you to do this work? Is there a personal motivation or a story from your childhood or past that inspired you in this direction?

SMB: I joke that I was raised by wolves. I was raised by a single father for most of my childhood, and countless men supported me as mentors and teachers and advocates. It never occurred to me that I would be treated differently because I was a woman. When I realized meritocracy might not be a given for me, I couldn’t help but think about what that means for other underrepresented populations. Like so many women especially, I have the badge of resilience—the one I never asked for but earned just because I was born female. Probably because I had early experiences of feeling as if somehow I wasn’t okay the way I was, I have spent a good amount of my life cultivating conscious compassion first for myself and then for others and teaching this practice to others.

IN: Tell us about your greatest success story since the outbreak of COVID-19.

SMB: Without question, the greatest success story for our institute was pulling off our 2020 Simmons Leadership Conference virtually. In fairness, Simmons came into this pandemic with nearly a decade of producing online degree courses. That said, we had never hosted a 5,000-person virtual conference before. We had five weeks. The way our sponsors, partners, and clients all rallied to support our effort for the “show to go on” was very inspiring. We believe this Boston-based conference to be the longest consecutively running conference created to inspire women to lead in the country, possibly the world. We had to live up to our “premier” status.

The production was professional from beginning to end, and our (now virtual) phone has been ringing off the hook with requests to learn how we did it. The gratitude of our participants was overwhelming. Never underestimate the power of inspiration—especially at a time of crisis. The 42nd Simmons Leadership Conference, on March 23, 2021, will also be virtual. We can’t wait to eventually come back in person and feel the energy of thousands of women together again. (For more information, see leadership.simmons.edu/boston/.) **IN**