

Cultural Competence as a Catalyst for Sustainable Change: Advancing Wellbeing, Equity, and Belonging in Academic and Professional Contexts

Kronmuller, D.

West Chester University - Pennsylvania

Cultural competence serves as a foundational catalyst for advancing equity, wellbeing, and belonging in both academic and professional settings. This systematic review examines how culturally responsive practices, particularly inclusive mentoring, supportive organizational frameworks, and robust professional networks, contribute to identity affirmation, mental health, and career progression for underrepresented groups. Drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship from education, healthcare, and organizational studies, the review consolidates evidence on promising strategies and exposes ongoing limitations in longitudinal research, intersectional analysis, and equity-centered evaluation methods. It further underscores the connection between cultural competence and social determinants of health, emphasizing the urgency of adopting holistic, sustainable models to foster inclusive excellence. Key recommendations include embedding cultural competence into institutional policy, leadership development, and mentorship structures to enable sustainable, systemic transformation. This review positions cultural competence as both an ethical imperative and a strategic lever for advancing justice and inclusion in diverse environments.

Keywords: Cultural competence, inclusive mentoring, equity, belonging

Introduction

Cultural competence is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in fostering equity, wellbeing, and belonging in academic and professional environments. As institutions across sectors strive to become more inclusive, there is a growing demand for evidence-based strategies that support diverse populations and address systemic barriers. This systematic review examines how culturally responsive practices, particularly inclusive mentoring, organizational frameworks, and professional networks, contribute to identity affirmation, mental health, and career advancement for underrepresented groups.

Drawing from interdisciplinary literature in education, healthcare, and organizational studies, this review synthesizes current strategies and identifies persistent gaps in the integration and evaluation of cultural competence. It highlights how these practices intersect with social determinants of health and are essential for systemic transformation. For example, language access policies that fail to provide adequate interpretation services in clinical settings represent a systemic barrier that disproportionately affects non-English-speaking populations. The review also explores the institutional policies and leadership models that embed cultural competence into sustainable structures, positioning it as both a moral obligation and a strategic driver of inclusive excellence.

By providing a comprehensive analysis of effective interventions and uncovering areas in need of further research, such as longitudinal outcomes, intersectional approaches, and equity metrics, this paper offers actionable insights for scholars, practitioners, and leaders aiming to create equitable, inclusive, and affirming environments.

Literature Review

Recent research highlights the urgent need for strong Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) frameworks in higher education and professional settings. Fagun (2025) demonstrates that institutions with comprehensive DEI strategies, including structured mentorship, equitable hiring practices, and targeted financial support, achieve higher student retention, greater faculty diversity, and more inclusive climates. Hill et al. (2024) and Byars-Winston et al. (2023) emphasize the effectiveness of culturally tailored interventions that support diverse and minoritized groups, particularly in academic and healthcare sectors.

McEwen et al. (2024) illustrate how social justice-oriented professional development fosters inclusive practices and equitable participation. In professional environments, Leuhery et al. (2024) identify leadership commitment, inclusive policies, diversity training, and employee resource groups as essential drivers of inclusion. Meta-analyses by Kasih and Ruslaini (2024) connect diversity initiatives with improved organizational

performance across industries, while Østergaard and Timmermans (2023) acknowledge human capital diversity as a key catalyst for innovation.

Importance of Cultural Competence

Cultural competence encompasses an individual and organization-wide ability to understand, respect, and effectively engage with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Campinha-Bacote, 2019). It is essential for fostering inclusive workplace climates, enhancing employee engagement, driving innovation, reducing turnover, and improving client relations, ultimately serving as a competitive advantage in diverse markets (Minh & Osei-Amponsah, 2024). Within healthcare, it involves awareness, attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for culturally respectful care, along with ongoing self-reflection on personal values, cultural norms, and biases (Li et al., 2023).

Urgency for Cultural Competence Now More Than Ever

Li et al. (2023) emphasizes the critical need for cultural competence education in medical training, noting that effective care demands more than cultural facts. Recent social movements such as Black Lives Matter and the COVID-19 pandemic have brought longstanding societal and healthcare inequities into sharp relief, underscoring the urgent need for culturally appropriate care (Liu et al., 2022). Beyond healthcare, cultural competence is imperative across all professional fields to navigate increasingly diverse workplaces, foster inclusion, and ensure equitable interactions in a globalized world.

Cultural Competence as a Catalyst for Inclusive and Equitable Professional Environments

This conceptual framework positions cultural competence as a multidimensional catalyst for inclusive, equitable, and sustainable professional environments. It incorporates both individual and organizational elements essential for effective cross-cultural engagement and systemic transformation rooted in equity, justice, and inclusion (Betancourt et al., 2003; Campinha-Bacote, 2019).

Individually, cultural competence entails self-awareness, recognition of personal biases, understanding of diverse cultural norms and social determinants of health, and communication grounded in respect and humility. The Campinha-Bacote ASKED model (awareness, skills, knowledge, encounters, and desire) offers a structured approach to cultivating these competencies (Ingram, 2012), with relevance extending beyond healthcare into broader academic and professional domains.

Methods

A systematic review was conducted across multiple databases, including CINAHL, Academic

Search Premier, Health Source, MasterFILE Premier, ERIC, and Academic OneFile were selected to capture interdisciplinary research spanning healthcare, education, and social sciences. The search targeted studies published within the last ten years (2015–2025) in the English language that explicitly addressed cultural competence or related concepts (e.g., cultural humility, inclusivity, diversity) within mentoring or institutional equity practices and reported empirical findings in peer-reviewed journals.

Search terms combined keywords and subject headings related to cultural competence, mentoring, institutional equity, diversity, and inclusion. Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to refine results, ensuring comprehensive coverage of relevant literature. Studies were included if they: (1) involved academic or professional settings, (2) examined culturally responsive mentoring or organizational practices, and (3) provided qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method empirical data. Exclusion criteria comprised non-peer-reviewed articles, theoretical papers without empirical data, opinion pieces, languages other than English, and studies outside the ten-year publication range.

Using thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008), recurring themes were identified across studies to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions and highlight persistent gaps. This evidence-based methodology informs the development of equity-focused mentoring programs, supports institutional transformation efforts, and guides strategies to reduce bias in diverse academic and professional environments.

Findings

Current Strategies for Promoting Cultural Competence

Evidence-based mentoring programs support underrepresented faculty and students by fostering culturally responsive relationships that affirm identity, promote career growth, and advance equity (El-Banna et al., 2025). Leadership efforts focus on transformational mentorship, recruitment, training, bias reduction, and call for ongoing research to sustain equity (Asriati, 2025).

Organizational cultural competence requires institutional frameworks that promote equity, representation, and respect for diversity through continuous training, supportive environments, identity affirmation, and accountability. Combining individual and organizational competence drives true multicultural capability (Ljubica et al., 2016).

Structured mentorship programs are pivotal in enhancing cultural competence. Amri et al. (2020) highlight the effectiveness of mentorship in global health, emphasizing the development of competencies through guided experiences. Similarly, Dahlberg and Byars-Winston (2019) discuss the importance of mentoring underrepresented students in science and math fields, noting that such relationships can foster

a sense of belonging and cultural understanding. Leadership plays a crucial role in this context; Asriati (2025) underscores that leaders who prioritize diversity and inclusion can create environments where cultural competence thrives.

Implementing organizational policies that support cultural competence is crucial. Betancourt et al. (2003) define cultural competence and provide a framework for addressing racial and ethnic disparities in health care and beyond. This can be used as a starting model. Ingram (2012) examines the relationship between health literacy and cultural competence using Campinha-Bacote's model, indicating that structured approaches can effectively enhance cultural understanding within organizations. Bentancourt et al. (2003) and Ingram (2012) serve as seminal articles in the field of cultural competence review and can be used for future review.

Engaging with local communities and understanding cultural determinants of health are vital. Kelly et al. (2024) conduct a scoping review on cultural determinants, highlighting the need for healthcare providers to be aware of cultural factors influencing health behaviors. McEwen et al. (2024) discuss professional development courses that promote social justice and cultural awareness among educators, suggesting that such initiatives can lead to more culturally competent practices.

The Role of Inclusive Mentoring and Networks

Culturally responsive mentoring and professional networks are critical for identity affirmation, belonging, and equitable mentorship access (Wright-Mair, 2020; Dahlberg & Byars-Winston, 2019). Communities of Practice (CoPs) promote collective learning, professional identity, and peer support, helping individuals navigate challenges and grow (Wofford et al., 2023). Ensuring equitable mentorship access remains essential for diversity and inclusion. Termini et al. (2021) state that scientists at all career stages can benefit from building diverse mentoring networks that transcend boundaries and promote inclusion.

Another example is the National Institutes of Health-funded National Research Mentoring Network (NRMN), which was established to enhance diversity in the biomedical research workforce through culturally responsive mentorship, networking, and professional development. The NRMNet portal offers accessible career-stage-specific resources and mentoring across the biomedical, behavioral, clinical, and social sciences (Javier et al., 2021).

Building inclusive mentoring networks involves seeking diverse, culturally responsive mentors, engaging in supportive communities of practice, and using accessible, career-stage-specific resources to promote equitable professional growth. Additionally, culturally responsive peer mentoring enhances psychological safety and organizational commitment, helping reduce turnover among underrepresented students and supporting success in professional settings

(Gehreke et al., 2024; Thakar, 2024).

Cultural Competence and Wellbeing

Cultural competence fosters mental health, psychological safety, and identity affirmation by creating inclusive environments where individuals feel respected and supported. When institutional norms clash with personal identity, cultural mismatch can cause exclusion and stress, harming wellbeing. Inclusive mentoring provides emotional and professional support to help underrepresented groups build resilience and navigate challenges (Pfund et al., 2022).

Campinha-Bacote (2019) introduces the concept of "Cultural Competemility," which integrates cultural competence and cultural humility. This paradigm shift emphasizes the importance of self-reflection and lifelong learning in developing cultural competence, particularly in mental health care. By acknowledging and respecting diverse cultural backgrounds, mental health professionals can build stronger therapeutic alliances, reduce biases, and improve the mental wellbeing of clients from various cultural groups.

Li et al. (2023) conduct a meta-ethnographic synthesis of cultural competence frameworks in medical and health professional education. Their review highlights that incorporating cultural competence training in health education enhances healthcare providers' abilities to deliver culturally sensitive care, which is crucial for patient satisfaction and wellbeing.

Alongside institutional supports like mentorship programs, equity training, and communities of practice, culturally competent practices reduce discrimination and address systemic barriers, promoting belonging, reducing stress, and improving mental health (Wyatt et al., 2023). Overall, cultural competence is vital for advancing wellbeing through equity, inclusion, and identity affirmation.

Intersections with Social Determinants of Health Cultural competence intersects with social determinants by addressing disparities, socioeconomic, racial, gender, and geographic, that impact career, academic, and wellbeing outcomes. Structural inequities often limit access, but effective mentoring and cultural competence can mitigate these barriers through tailored support and equity promotion (Pfund et al., 2022; Amir et al., 2020)

Recent research highlights how mentorship that integrates awareness of social determinants of health (SDOH) improves retention, job satisfaction, and career progression for marginalized groups by providing not only professional guidance but also addressing systemic challenges such as discrimination and unequal access to networks (Smith et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2023). Integrating cultural determinants of health with SDOH offers a strengths-based, holistic perspective on Indigenous health and wellbeing, which can also inform approaches for other underrepresented populations (Kelly et al., 2024). This integrated

approach acknowledges the role of cultural identity, community practices, and historical context in shaping health outcomes, offering a more comprehensive lens for understanding and addressing health inequities.

Discussion

Gaps in the Literature and Limitations

Current research on cultural competence and mentorship reveals several critical gaps. There is a notable lack of longitudinal studies that measure long-term outcomes, limiting understanding of sustained impacts. Additionally, insufficient attention has been given to intersectionality and the experiences of marginalized voices, which restricts the inclusivity of existing models. Many mentorship programs face challenges with scalability and transferability across different contexts. Furthermore, there are gaps in the development of robust evaluation tools and equity metrics to effectively assess mentorship quality and equity outcomes.

Restricting included studies to those published in English may have excluded relevant research from non-English sources, potentially limiting the global perspective. Although multiple databases were searched, some pertinent studies, especially unpublished or grey literature, may have been missing, introducing publication bias. The variability in study designs, populations, and outcome measures across included research posed challenges for synthesis and generalization. Additionally, the focus on academic and professional contexts limits applicability to other settings, and potential reviewer bias during screening and data extraction cannot be entirely ruled out. These limitations, alongside the identified gaps, underscore the need for continued, rigorous research to advance more effective and inclusive mentorship practices.

Lastly, length limitations can restrict the depth and detail presented in a systematic review, often leading to the omission of comprehensive search methods, critical appraisals, and nuanced discussions, which may impact the thoroughness and clarity of the findings.

Strategies for Change

Strategies for change include implementing evidence-based, scalable frameworks for inclusive mentoring; integrating cultural competence into institutional policies and practices; fostering sustainable communities of practice; and establishing robust evaluation and accountability measures. Effective change requires embedding cultural competence as a core organizational value, supported by leadership commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion at all levels. Institutions should prioritize longitudinal mentorship programs that are adaptable to diverse populations and contexts, with particular attention to intersectionality and addressing systemic barriers. Additionally, training initiatives must extend beyond individual skill development to include organizational culture

shifts that promote psychological safety, cultural humility, and continuous learning.

Building partnerships with local communities and incorporating cultural determinants alongside social determinants of health will enrich programs and policies, ensuring relevance and responsiveness to the needs of underrepresented groups. Transparent data collection and equity-focused metrics are essential for monitoring progress and guiding iterative improvements. Finally, fostering accessible, career-stage-specific resources and diverse mentoring networks can enhance professional growth and retention of marginalized individuals, reinforcing pathways toward inclusive excellence. These strategies, combined with ongoing research to fill identified gaps, will contribute to sustained systemic transformation that advances equity, wellbeing, and belonging across academic and professional settings.

Conclusion

Cultural competence is both a moral imperative and a strategic lever for advancing equity, wellbeing, and belonging in academic and professional contexts. This review finds that evidence-based practices such as inclusive mentoring, culturally responsive leadership development, and institutional policy integration are particularly effective in affirming identity, reducing systemic barriers, and fostering sustainable inclusion.

What Works

Inclusive mentoring networks, equity-focused leadership training, and culturally responsive organizational frameworks consistently promote psychological safety, retention, and career advancement. These strategies are most effective when they incorporate community-informed practices, address social determinants of health, and are supported by ongoing evaluation and accountability.

For Whom

These interventions are especially impactful for historically marginalized groups, including Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC); first-generation college students; LGBTQ+ individuals; and underrepresented faculty and professionals.

When

Cultural competence initiatives are most effective when implemented at critical transition points—such as during college entry, early-career development, or mid-career advancement—when individuals are most vulnerable to systemic exclusion and in need of support structures that affirm their identities and potential.

Sustaining Change

To sustain change, institutions must invest in longitudinal research to measure outcomes over

time, develop inclusive evaluation tools, and embed cultural competence into every level of policy and practice. These actions are essential for transforming systems and creating environments where all individuals can thrive with dignity, purpose, and belonging.

References

- Amri, M. M., Kocsis, E., Dhawan, S., Logan, D., Angelakis, C., & Cole, D. C. (2020). The utility of a structured mentorship program for enhancing competencies in global health. *Journal of Global Health, 10*(1), 010301. <https://doi.org/10.7189/jogh.10.010301>
- Asriati, A. (2025). The role of leadership in fostering diversity and inclusion: Insights from existing literature. *Golden Ratio of Data in Summary, 5*(2), 217–228. <https://doi.org/10.52970/grdis.v5i2.1142>
- Betancourt, J. R., Green, A. R., Carrillo, J. E., & Ananeh-Firempong, O., 2nd. (2003). Defining cultural competence: A practical framework for addressing racial/ethnic disparities in health and health care. *Public Health Reports, 118*(4), 293–302. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0033-3549\(04\)50253-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0033-3549(04)50253-4)
- Campinha-Bacote, J. (2019). Cultural competence: A paradigm shift in the cultural competence versus cultural humility debate – Part I. *OJIN: The Online Journal of Issues in Nursing, 24*(1). <https://doi.org/10.3912/OJIN.Vol24No01PPT20>
- Dahlberg, M. L., & Byars-Winston, A. (Eds.). (2019). The science of effective mentorship in STEM (Chapter 3). In *Mentoring underrepresented students in STEM: Why do identities matter?*. National Academies Press (US). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK552781/>
- El-Banna, M. M., Alrimawi, I., Davis-Collins, K., & Rollins-Monroe, K. (2025). Recruiting and retaining diverse faculty and students: Strategies for success. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing, 2025*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.teln.2025.02.034>
- Gehreke, L., Schilling, H., & Kauffeld, S. (2024). Effectiveness of peer mentoring in the study entry phase: A systematic review. *Review of Education, 12*, e3462. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3462>
- Hill, K. A., Austin, A. W., & Enders, F. T. (2024). A scoping review of interventions to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in the United States healthcare workforce. *Journal of Clinical and Translational Science*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23821205251333034>
- Fagun, O. (2025). The future of diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education in United States. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS), 9*(3s), 1164–1175. <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.903SEU0088>
- Ingram, R. R. (2012). Using Campinha-Bacote's process of cultural competence model to examine the relationship between health literacy and cultural competence. *Journal of Advanced Nursing, 68*(3), 695–704. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2011.05822.x>
- Javier, D., Stinson, K., Zavala, M., Ahmed, T., & Vishwanatha, J. K. (2021). NRMNet: Building a national resource for mentorship, networking, and professional development to enhance diversity. *Ethnicity & Disease, 31*(3), 469–480. <https://doi.org/10.18865/ed.31.3.469>
- Johnson, B. A., Arocho, R., & Tolman, A. O. (2023). Mentoring by design: Examples of effective faculty development programs. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 2023*, 101–110. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20563>
- Kasih, E., & Ruslaini, R. (2024). The impact of diversity and inclusion initiatives on organizational performance. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4745689>
- Kelly, M. M., Marriott-Statham, K., Clapham, K., Metusela, C., & Mackay, M. (2024). Understanding the cultural determinants of health: A scoping review. *First Nations Health and Wellbeing – The Lowitja Journal, 2*, 100036. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fnhli.2024.100036>
- Leuhery, F., Padang, N. S., Karyono, Puspitasari, D., & Judijanto, L. (2024). Workplace diversity and inclusion: Strategies for effective implementation and benefits to organizational culture. *Dinasti International Journal of Education Management and Social Science, 5*(4). <https://doi.org/10.38035/dijefa.v5i4>
- Li, S., Miles, K., George, R. E., Ertubey, C., Pype, P., & Liu, J. (2023). A critical review of cultural competence frameworks and models in medical and health professional education: A meta-ethnographic synthesis: BEME Guide No. 79. *Medical Teacher, 45*(10), 1085–1107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159X.2023.2174419>
- Ljubica, J., Dulčić, Ž., & Aust, I. (2016). Linking individual and organizational cultural competences: One step closer to multicultural organization. *Management, 21*(2, Special Issue), 51–82.
- Liu, J., Miles, K., & Li, S. (2022). Cultural competence education for undergraduate medical students: An ethnographic study.

- Frontiers in Education*, 7, 980633. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.980633>
- McEwen, C., Mueller, B., Trede, F., Archer, B., & Zapia, M. (2024). Advancing inclusive practices in higher education: Possibilities and limitations of a social justice professional development course. *Asia-Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2024.2417072>
- Minh, T. T., & Osei-Amponsah, C. (2024). Cultural competence-based framework: A multilevel and multidimensional perspective on contemporary science culture. *Culture of Sciences*, 7(1). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20966083241241575>
- Østergaard, C. R., & Timmermans, B. (2023). Workplace diversity and innovation performance: Current state of affairs and future directions. arXiv. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2311.05219>
- Pfund, C., Sancheznieto, F., Byars-Winston, A., Zárate, S., Black, S., Birren, B., Rogers, J., & Asai, D. J. (2022). Evaluation of a culturally responsive mentorship education program for the advisers of Howard Hughes Medical Institute Gilliam Program graduate students. *CBE—Life Sciences Education*, 21(3), ar40. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.21-11-0321>
- Smith, T. W., Luetkemeyer, J. R., Wilson, R., Cheek, A. E., & Brewer, D. (2023). Cultivating capacity with a mentoring guild: Constellations continued. *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development*, 42(2), 2. <https://doi.org/10.3998/tia.2898>
- Termini, C. M., Hinton, A. O., Jr., Garza-López, E., Koomoa, D. L., Davis, J. S., & Martínez-Montemayor, M. M. (2021). Building diverse mentoring networks that transcend boundaries in cancer research. *Trends in Cancer*, 7(5), 385–388. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.trecan.2021.01.001>
- Thomas, J., Harden, A. Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC Med Res Methodol* 8, 45 (2008). <https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-8-45>
- Wofford, A., Burton, A., Dennin, K., & Gardner, R. (2023). Equity-minded mentoring toolkit. <https://igenetwork.org/resource/equity-minded-mentoring-toolkit>
- Wright-Mair, R. (2020). Longing to belong: Mentoring relationships as a pathway to fostering a sense of belonging for racially minoritized faculty at predominantly white institutions. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity (JCSCORE)*, 6(2), 2–31. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48644535>
- Wyatt, G. E., Hamilton, A. B., & Milburn, N. (2023). Mentoring to dismantle structural racism. *American Journal of Public Health*, 113(S2), S94–S97. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2023.307343>