Five Principles for Enacting Equity by Design

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In *America's Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education* (Witham et al. 2015b), we affirmed that effective higher education reform efforts must be infused with an awareness of the ways in which many groups within US society have been historically excluded from educational opportunities, or marginalized within the structures and institutions that house those opportunities. We have characterized this awareness as *equity-mindedness*—a way of approaching educational reform that foregrounds the policies and practices contributing to disparities in educational achievement and abstains from blaming students for those accumulated disparities (Bensimon 2007; Dowd and Bensimon 2015). In this article, we elaborate on the five principles for achieving equity by design that we first introduced in *America's Unmet Promise*, with examples drawn from campuses that have used the Center for Urban Education's Equity Scorecard.

The Equity Scorecard catalyzes a process of sustained change by engaging practitioners in equity-focused inquiry, using tools designed to yield more just, equitable, and effective learning environments for African Americans, Latinos/as, American Indians, and subordinated Asian and Pacific Islander populations. These tools prompt practitioners to integrate equity as a criterion for assessment across all core institutional practices. The scorecard is grounded in a theory of change that relies on the power of practitioner engagement in inquiry. Through a process of discovery that makes inequities visible, practitioners gain motivation to make changes in their own practices and in their institutions.

We believe that every campus has many practitioners with the potential to become "first-generation equity workers," as James Gray of the Community College of Aurora (Colorado) calls himself (Felix et al., forthcoming). These change agents cultivate the ability to see, communicate about, and address inequities through their daily work. As an administrator at the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE) stated, "[Using the Equity Scorecard] has changed my world view.... it has made me really reflective about the perceptions of the world by others. It's been my experience that it's at the individual level where you suddenly realize that your world view has changed, that you really see the change happen.... I don't think it happens as a group; I think it happens as people."

The five principles discussed below provide the architecture that leaders and practitioners need to build equity by design.

Principle 1: Clarity in language, goals, and measures is vital to effective equitable practices.

Clarity in language. Inequality in higher education is a structural problem that is hidden or revealed through the use of language imbued with political and social meaning. Language conveys how individuals, alone and in the company of others, give meaning to numeric patterns; how they talk about race without talking about it (Pollock 2004); how they shape the reality of racial inequity. Language reflects culturally acquired knowledge

that forms the schemas of practitioners, leaders, policymakers, and others whose actions can make—or unmake—the antiracism project in higher education (Bensimon, forthcoming).

Clarity of language is especially important because equity is so often confounded with equality. As one practitioner at the University of Wisconsin commented, "I used to think that equity means you treat everyone equally, but now I see it more in terms of outcomes. Are people able to achieve similar results at the end of their education regardless of where they started?" As described by this practitioner, *equality* is defined as treating everyone the same or giving everyone the same opportunities regardless of their individual attributes. *Equity*, in contrast, means accounting for differences in individual attributes and experiences for the purposes of achieving equal outcomes.

Clarity is also important when identifying racial and ethnic groups. Shorthand terms such as "URM" and "at risk" are problematic on many levels (Bensimon, forthcoming). Aggregating all groups into single color-blind categories erases the monumental differences in circumstances experienced by black, Hispanic, Asian American, and American Indian populations. Additionally, such aggregation contravenes equity-mindedness as described in Principle 2.

Clarity in goals and measures. Quantitative data are typically not available in user-friendly formats, and individuals who do not routinely work with data may struggle to use them. This can pose an obstacle to the goal of developing clear goals and measures. Practitioners who are unaccustomed to using data—the majority of faculty, staff, and administrators—often feel overwhelmed by long data reports. Worse, they may be too embarrassed to admit that they can't see a "story" in the percentages and numbers.

To make data more comprehensible, the Center for Urban Education designed the Benchmarking Equity and Student Success Tool (BESST). This interactive tool makes the story behind the data visible, understandable, and actionable for practitioners. Using the BESST, practitioners can understand equity gaps longitudinally and by race and ethnicity, and can manipulate the data to determine how many more students of a particular group need to reach particular milestones in order for an institution to achieve its overall goal. Figures 1 and 2 illustrate BESST data for a four-year college examining credit accumulation for a cohort of students who entered college in 2009. Figure 1 shows that 37.8 percent of Hispanic students accumulated thirty credits in the first year of college, 8.1 percentage points lower than the credit accumulation rate for all students. Figure 2 shows that in order for Hispanic students' credit accumulation to equal the current rate for all students, the college needs thirty-nine more Hispanic students to earn thirty credits within the first year.

Data that are disaggregated in this manner can be very effective in increasing practitioners' awareness and their desire to know why equity gaps exist. Seeing data displayed in the format presented in Figures 1 and 2 prompted James Gray, chair of the mathematics department at the Community College of Aurora, to launch several equity-focused reforms, including changing the hiring process to ensure a diverse candidate pool; using data more purposefully to assess success patterns by race, ethnicity, and course section; and offering

more intentional coaching for faculty with large equity gaps in outcomes. (For more on data disaggregation, see Witham et al. 2015a; for a detailed description of the changes at the Community College of Aurora, see Felix et al., forthcoming.)

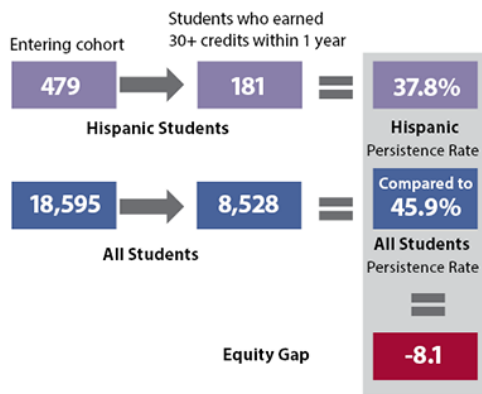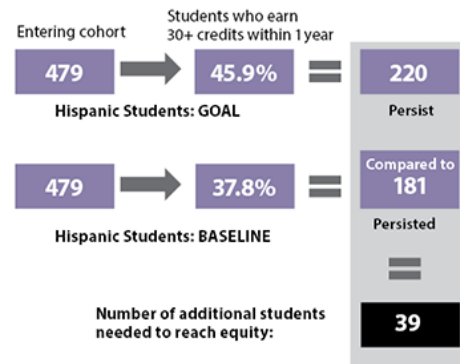**FIGURE 1. Equity Gaps in First-Year Credit Accumulation**

Entering cohort → Students who earned 30+ credits within 1 year

479 → 181 = 37.8% Hispanic Persistence Rate — **Hispanic Students**

18,595 → 8,528 = Compared to 45.9% All Students Persistence Rate — **All Students**

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Equity Gap = -8.1

FIGURE 2. Number of Students Needed to Achieve Equity Goals

Entering cohort → Students who earn 30+ credits within 1 year

479 → 45.9% = 220 Persist — **Hispanic Students: GOAL**

479 → 37.8% = Compared to 181 Persisted — **Hispanic Students: BASELINE**

=

Number of additional students needed to reach equity: 39

Principle 2: "Equity-mindedness" should be the guiding paradigm for language and action.

The term *equity* "has been more or less universally embraced by policy centers/institutes, major Foundations interested in reform and the higher education field itself" (Anderson 2012, 134). But the term is not always used in a manner that engages critically with race. An equity-minded approach raises consciousness of the need to consider equity in connection with historical and political understandings of stratification.

Equity-minded individuals are aware of the sociohistorical context of exclusionary practices and racism in higher education and the impact of power asymmetries on opportunities and outcomes, particularly for African Americans and Latinas/os. Equity-minded individuals are

- **Color-conscious (as opposed to color-blind) in a critical sense.** Being color-conscious means noticing and questioning patterns of educational outcomes that reveal unexplainable differences in outcomes for minoritized students (Gillborn 2005); it means viewing inequalities in the context of a history of exclusion, discrimination, and educational apartheid.
- **Aware that beliefs, expectations, and practices assumed to be neutral can have outcomes that are racially disadvantageous.** Racial disadvantage is created when unequal outcomes are attributed to students' cultural predispositions or when practices are based on stereotypical assumptions about the capacity, aspirations, or motives of minoritized populations (Bensimon 2012).
- **Willing to assume responsibility for the elimination of inequality.** Rather than viewing inequalities as a natural catastrophe (Coates 2015), equity-minded individuals allow for the possibility that inequalities might be created or exacerbated by taken-for-granted practices and policies, inadequate knowledge, a lack of cultural know-how, or the absence of institutional support—all of which can be changed.
- **Aware that while racism is not always overt, racialized patterns nevertheless permeate policies and practices in higher education institutions.** When policies have a disproportionate impact on students of color, they have the effect of maintaining racial hierarchies.

As an Equity Scorecard participant at the University of Wisconsin stated, "Equity-mindedness asks us to turn the mirror on ourselves and accept the fact … that we actually may play a pretty significant role in creating [inequitable outcomes]. So there are barriers that are extant but for many people very difficult to identify, [and] because they seem so normalized, people continue to work with these practices never once considering that these seemingly innocuous practices contribute to inequitable outcomes."

Principle 3: Equitable practice and policies are designed to accommodate differences in the contexts of students' learning—not to treat all students the same.

As we stated in *America's Unmet Promise,*

Simply put, achieving equality in outcomes does not mean—in fact cannot mean—treating all students as though they are the same. Rather, [equity-focused] policies and practices in higher education recognize and accommodate differences in students' aspirations, life circumstances, ways of engaging in learning and participating in college, and identities as learners and students. (Witham et al. 2015b, 31)

For example, when the director of the honors program at a University of Wisconsin campus was confronted with data showing that the program had no students of color, rather than assuming these students just did not meet eligibility criteria, he asked a few simple questions: *What are the criteria for acceptance to the honors program? In what ways might the criteria have disadvantaged students of color? When were the criteria established, and are they still relevant?* He found that the criteria had been in existence for more than thirty years and depended on a single factor: ACT scores. In response to this new information, he said, "It was clear that there was a problem and it was also a very concrete thing."

With the appropriate tools, the director was able to see that the program's entry requirements systematically excluded students of color. The concreteness of the problem, along with the authority of his position, empowered him to develop a holistic admissions process. In one year, the all-white honors program became more inclusive with the addition of African American, Latino/a, and Hmong students. The program also began including courses on critical race theory and ethnic studies (Bishop 2014).

Principle 4: Enacting equity requires a continual process of learning, disaggregating data, and questioning assumptions about relevance and effectiveness.

While disaggregated data are necessary to identify and prioritize problems, disaggregated data alone are insufficient to attain equity-focused change. What matters is how practitioners *interpret* the data. Do they interpret racialized inequities as a symptom of student deficiencies or as an indication of failed practices? The interpretive lenses through which practitioners make sense of data are far more consequential than the collection of the data itself.

Both James Gray at the Community College of Aurora and the director of the honors program at the Wisconsin campus could have looked at their data and concluded that racial differences were attributable to characteristics over which they had no control. But institutional change requires the opportunity and capacity to learn from failure; it means digging into data deeply, purposefully, and systematically. Even though colleges and universities are organizations dedicated to creating and communicating knowledge, most lack the tools needed to support a continual process of learning among practitioners.

To address these limitations, the Center for Urban Education has drawn on the methodology of participatory critical action research, where professionals conduct inquiry into their own practices to learn how those practices work and why they may not be working as intended. According to Kemmis and McTaggart, "change cannot be secured if participants do not change themselves, their understandings, their practices, or their constitution of the setting" (2000, 590). For this reason, "participatory action research is the preferred approach to social and educational change" (590). Through inquiry, practitioners are able to question routines and develop the habits of equity-minded practice.

As an administrator at PASSHE observed, "It's like strategic planning of all types. Strategic planning doesn't have a beginning or an end; it's a continuous improvement process....You circle back. You're continuously looking at data."

Principle 5: Equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle.

Instead of thinking about equity as a "targeted strategy" that can be achieved through one particular office or program, institutions should approach equity as a normative standard for all aspects of the institution, from resource allocation to assessment to strategic planning.

Solutions are shaped by the way problems are defined. Embedding equity into the core of institutional work means reframing inequity as a problem created by color-blind practices and procedures and the lack of spaces to talk about race. Enacting equity as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle requires practitioners to engage in the following:

- **Let go of traditional schemata** that paint student success as a matter of effort, motivation, self-regulation, goal commitment, or other student characteristics. These qualities are important, but focusing on them draws attention away from practices—influential factors that are within practitioners' control. Put simply, practitioners taking the traditional approach to student success may ask: *What does this student lack and how can he/she be remediated?* From an equity-minded standpoint, the primary question is: *Why are our practices failing to produce success for students of color?*
- **Understand the difference between horizontal and vertical equity.** The standard of *horizontal equity* asserts that those with equal needs deserve equal educational resources. *Vertical equity*, which is more often contested, states that those with greater needs should receive greater resources (Dowd and Bensimon 2015, 10–11).

- **Learn to make the pursuit of equity a normal practice** that is evident in how problems and solutions are defined, implemented, and evaluated. Leaders, administrators, staff, and trustees must demonstrate equity-mindedness through language, reasoning, and action.

Making equity pervasive will require sustained buy-in and ownership across an institution or system. To institutionalize equity as a priority, equity-minded leaders should call practitioners to inquiry and action repeatedly. An administrator at PASSHE summed up the need for sustained commitment: "I think that buy-in around the idea of equity is gained by staying the course and sticking with it for the long term. If you can successfully do that, I think that you will get buy-in."

Conclusion

More than fifty years have passed since the adoption of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. But its promise of a more equal, just, and great society is belied by the evidence, according to every metric of social justice. Inequality, segregation, and racism—both overt and implicit—are intense and continue to grow. In 1903, W. E. B. Du Bois declared the color line the problem of the twentieth century. It is alarming that Du Bois's observation is an apt description of our society and educational system more than one hundred years later. As a society, we are a long way from accepting equity as a goal worthy of investment. As a system of higher education, we are a long way from moving equity from rhetoric to action. The five principles outlined here provide a place to start.

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