



Taking Equity-Minded Action to Close Equity Gaps

► **Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux**, Associate Director for Research and Policy, Center for Urban Education, and Research Associate Professor, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California

Estela Mara Bensimon, Director, Center for Urban Education, and Professor of Higher Education, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California

Inequality is one of the most enduring features of our nation's higher education system. Racial/ethnic and class-based disparities in college access, enrollment, and completion persist despite years of programmatic and policy efforts to counteract them. Though it is true that racially minoritized and low-income students are more likely to enroll in some form of postsecondary education than in years past, their likelihood of completing a bachelor's degree once enrolled in college falls far below that of their white and economically privileged counterparts (Carnevale and Strohl 2013; Perna and Finney 2014). The differences in college enrollment and college completion among historically marginalized and white and affluent populations have widened (Witham et al. 2015), suggesting that postsecondary education remains "separate and unequal" (Carnevale and Strohl 2013). Clearly, American higher education has an equity problem.

AN INCREASED FOCUS ON EQUITY

The silver lining to this situation is that policymakers and institutional leaders increasingly recognize the urgent need to focus their efforts and resources on creating equity in higher education. Several states have acknowledged the need to make their higher education systems more equitable for African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, low-income students, and other historically marginalized populations. For example, California has spent nearly \$400 million to fund student equity efforts at the state's community colleges over the past three years. To receive the funding, each of California's 113 community colleges was required to develop a detailed student equity plan in which they presented institutional data for key

outcomes, identified which demographic groups were experiencing inequities, set goals for closing those equity gaps, and proposed specific activities to reach those goals.

Higher education organizations and private foundations also play an important role in creating equitable outcomes by undertaking initiatives aimed at informing equity-focused policy and practice. In 2015, for example, the Lumina Foundation and the Center for Urban Education (CUE) began a partnership to increase the number of states that incorporate closing equity gaps into their policy goals. AAC&U's *Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence* project, funded by Strada and Great Lakes, provides a model of how higher education associations and private foundations might partner to guide the design and implementation of institutional equity efforts. As discussed in this issue of *Peer Review*, thirteen institutions with diverse missions and student bodies received funding to develop campus action plans to close equity gaps experienced by racial/ethnic minorities, low-income students, first-generation students, and adult learners.

These kinds of investments in equity efforts, whether by state governments or philanthropic organizations, reflect an increased focus on equity as a legitimate priority. Further, the growing presence of equity in policy discussions indicates that more leaders realize that national and state-level priorities to increase degree attainment and improve student success require the elimination of equity gaps experienced by African Americans, Latinas, Latinos, Native Americans, Pacific Islanders, and Southeast Asian students. Similarly, unless and until low-income and first-generation students experience equitable outcomes



AAC&U, in partnership with the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at the University of Southern California, is helping campuses identify baseline evidence about existing campus efforts to track, improve, and close equity gaps in the achievement of key learning and achievement outcomes for all students.

"While postsecondary institutions are becoming more diverse, the degree attainment gap for low-income individuals is widening. In 2013, individuals from high-income families were eight times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree by age twenty-four than were those from low-income families. In 1970, the high-income individuals were more than six times more likely to earn a bachelor's degree. In the intervening 43 years, bachelor degree attainment among those from wealthy families nearly doubled while it barely moved for those in the poorest families."

Source: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education and PennAHEAD, *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States* (2015)

"The vast majority of undergraduates felt safe and comfortable being themselves at their institution, and at least three-quarters felt valued and part of a campus community. However, certain populations—such as those with a gender identity other than man or woman as well as African American, Alaska Native or American Indian, and multiracial students—expressed less agreement with statements about safety and belonging."

Alexander C. McCormick, Indiana University–Bloomington

Source: National Survey of Student Engagement, *Engagement Insights: Survey Findings on the Quality of Undergraduate Education* (2016)

The educators participating in this initiative are leading change on their campuses and building institutional capacity to ask and to address the difficult questions about equity and student success. In October 2015, campus teams participated in an Equity Academy, facilitated by AAC&U and CUE, in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Prior to the equity academy, the teams (1) collected data, based on the previously stated objectives, to examine equity gaps; (2) utilized AAC&U's *Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence: A Campus Guide for Self-Study and Planning*; and (3) read a number of equity-focused publications, including *America's Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education* (written by CUE and published by AAC&U).

At the Equity Academy, campus teams examined institutional data and addressed the following questions:

- How can we build capacity for educators to ask and respond to questions about equity that can lead to campus change?
- How can we move the dialogue about student learning and success from deficit-minded approaches to asset-based approaches?
- How do we motivate faculty and staff to address equity as intrinsic to higher education's mission?
- What does it mean to be an equity-minded practitioner? What does it mean to have an equity-minded pedagogy?

Addressing equity and inclusive excellence requires clarity in language and goals, intentionality, and accountability. Those who engage in this endeavor must ask themselves: How are equity and excellence defined at our institution? How does our campus define and model inclusion? Who is currently excluded from achieving excellence?

Without a clear understanding of how the institution and educators define and value equity and inclusive excellence as priorities for student learning and success, a campus risks the possibility that the work will be done in isolation of strategic goals and visioning. Without clear equity goals to promote accountability to monitor progress, the aspiration of addressing equity and making excellence inclusive may not translate into sustainable improvements in campus practice.

Through the vision and practice of inclusive excellence, AAC&U calls for higher education to address diversity, inclusion, and equity as critical to the wellbeing of democratic culture. Making excellence inclusive is thus an active process through which colleges and universities achieve excellence in learning, teaching, student development, institutional functioning, and engagement in local and global communities. The action of making excellence inclusive requires that we uncover inequities in student success, identify effective educational practices, and embed such practices systematically for sustained institutional change.

The campus teams that are part of this institutional change effort are prioritizing definable and measurable equity goals as a key part of accountability and shared visioning. After 2015's Equity Academy, each campus team developed campus action plans that include quantifiable equity goals and interventions to alleviate the gaps in student achievement and learning outcomes.

In this special issue of *Peer Review*, the campus teams share their evolving strategies for examining equity and how they are accelerating broad systemic-change efforts. We invite readers of this publication to join in the continuing conversation on what it will take to advance equity and make excellence inclusive. ■



in degree attainment, the nation's ambitious college completion goals cannot be realized.

For nearly twenty years, CUE has conducted socially conscious research and developed tools that help institutions of higher education produce equity in student outcomes. Estela Bensimon, CUE's founder and director, developed the Equity Scorecard™ process to promote practitioner learning that brings about the major changes in institutional practices, routines, and culture needed to obtain equitable outcomes for historically marginalized and minoritized populations (Bensimon and Malcom 2012). CUE's approach frames inequity as a *problem of practice* rather than a *problem with students*, emphasizing the responsibility of higher education institutions, faculty, staff, and leaders to eliminate disparities in educational outcomes and create equity for all students.

Through the study of their own institutions, practitioners can identify ways that existing policies and practices inadvertently create or further inequity. Faculty, staff, and institutional leaders engage in the inquiry process with a goal of “remediating” their own practices and mindsets to close equity gaps (Bensimon and Malcom 2012; Dowd and Bensimon 2015). Using CUE's data and inquiry tools, our institutional partners have developed and implemented *equity-minded* practices and policies, and have become more effective at narrowing racialized equity gaps. Though the specific changes implemented at CUE's partner institutions have varied widely depending on each institution's inequitable outcomes, local context, and priorities, their actions were guided by the principles of equity-mindedness. Described below, these five principles outline a different way of thinking about inequities and educational practice that has been demonstrated to be effective at closing racialized equity gaps.

THE PRINCIPLES OF EQUITY-MINDEDNESS

When practitioners confront any kind of challenge on their campuses, they interpret

that challenge using a schema, or cognitive framework, to make sense of the problem. That schema informs an individual's understanding of the problem—its causes and effects—and guides their thinking about potential solutions and actions to be taken related to the problem (Gioia and Poole 1984). When it comes to the problem of educational inequities experienced by African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and other minoritized populations, the schema often used to understand the problem treats inequities as an unfortunate, but unavoidable, phenomenon, whose fault lies with students, their families, and communities (Bensimon and Malcom 2012). As evidenced by the persistent nature of racial/ethnic educational inequities, this deficit-minded approach has served neither us nor our students well.

Equity-mindedness is a schema that provides an alternative framework for understanding the causes of equity gaps in outcomes and the action needed to close them. Equity-mindedness encompasses being (1) race conscious, (2) institutionally focused, (3) evidence based, (4) systemically aware, and (5) action oriented (Bensimon and Malcom 2012; Center for Urban Education, n.d.; Dowd and Bensimon 2015). Based on our research and work with over one hundred institutional partners, we suggest that reducing inequities experienced by African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans requires that practitioners become more equity-minded and embed equity-mindedness in practices and policies across the institution. Each of the principles of equity-mindedness is discussed in more detail below.

1. *Equity-Minded Practitioners, Practices, and Policies Are Race-Conscious in an Affirmative Sense.*

Race-consciousness in an affirmative sense involves noticing racial inequities in educational outcomes and experiences, naming those specific racial/ethnic groups that are

experiencing equity gaps, and shying away from euphemisms often used to avoid open and honest discussions of the roles that race and racism play in the perpetuation of educational inequity. Equity-mindedness necessitates talking about race in meaningful ways. Certainly, talking about race may be uncomfortable for some and can be fraught with potential rhetorical landmines. Yet, these conversations are critically important. The problem of race-based inequities in educational outcomes cannot be solved if we do not even have the will to name the problem. Using euphemisms like “diverse students” or “underrepresented students” prevents practitioners from understanding that current practices and policies may have a disproportionately negative impact on African American, Latino/a, and Native American students.

Similarly, being equity-minded requires that higher education practitioners and leaders resist the temptation to use socioeconomic status as a proxy for race. Likely due to the political contention around issues of race, many faculty, staff, administrators, and policy makers center equity conversations on the inequities experienced by low-income students, remaining silent on the unique patterns of disadvantage experienced by African Americans, Latinas/os, and Native Americans. Though both race- and class-based inequities in outcomes exist, and some students experience them in combination, they are not the same thing. Numerous studies have demonstrated that when controlling for class, race-based disparities in educational and economic outcomes remain (e.g., Carnevale and Strohl 2013). In other words, low-income white students fare better in college entry, persistence, degree completion, and post-college employment and earnings than their low-income African American, Latina/o, and Native American peers. The same is true of middle-income and upper-income students. This is not to say that higher education institutions and policymakers should not prioritize reducing



class-based inequities. Instead, equity-mindedness requires acknowledging that race and class are different, and eliminating race-based inequities will require a different approach.

2. Equity-Minded Practitioners, Practices, and Policies Reflect an Awareness of and Responsiveness to the Systemic Nature of Racial/Ethnic Inequities.

To possess systemic awareness is to understand the ways in which current inequities are related to structural inequalities and the historic and ongoing denial of educational and economic opportunity experienced by African Americans, Latinas/os, Native Americans, and other racially minoritized populations. Our nation's schools are more racially segregated than before the *Brown v. Board* decision, with African American and Latino/a children more likely than white and Asian children to attend under-resourced, high-poverty schools (UCLA Civil Rights project). These intensely segregated, under-resourced schools offer students a truncated curriculum, leading to large racial disparities in access to college preparatory and AP coursework (The College Board 2014). Though class plays a part in this process, it is uniquely racialized. Patterns of school segregation are closely related to residential segregation resulting from the legacy of racism and a long history of housing policies that discriminate on the basis of race. Consider that, for example, Black families with household incomes of \$100,000 or more "are more likely to live in poorer neighborhoods than even white households making less than \$25,000" (Eligon and Gebeloff 2016). Discrimination in employment, lending, voting, and a host of other areas contribute to the racial inequities observed today. The underlying point is that systemic racial/ethnic inequities did not just happen—they were created over time through policy and entrenched racism. Acknowledging this enables equity-minded practitioners to situate present inequities

within the sociohistorical context of the United States, and to understand that they are a dysfunction of structures, policies, and practices.

3. Equity-Minded Practitioners View Inequities as Problems of Practice and Feel a Personal and Institutional Responsibility to Address Them.

Equity-mindedness emphasizes institutional responsibility to create equity and directs practitioners to focus on what they can do to close equity gaps. Rather than attribute inequities in outcomes to student deficits, being equity-minded involves interpreting inequitable outcomes as a signal that practices are not working as intended. Instead of focusing on "fixing" students, equity-minded practitioners continually reassess their practices and consider how those practices can be remediated in order to achieve institutional equity goals (Bensimon and Malcom 2012). From this perspective, the elimination of inequities comes about through changes in institutional practices, policies, culture, and routines.

Since the founding of the center, CUE has studied practitioners' conversations about race and equity to understand the explanations that are typically relied upon to explain inequities in student outcomes. We often hear faculty, staff, and administrators argue that inequitable outcomes emerge from deficits in student motivation, discipline, preparation, or study skills. By emphasizing practitioner and institutional responsibility for creating equity for students, CUE encourages practitioners to shift the way that they make sense of and talk about inequitable outcomes. For example, a faculty member who may have previously attributed race-based gaps in developmental math course completion to Black or Latino/a students' unwillingness to use the tutoring center might now ask herself how welcoming the tutoring center is to minoritized students, whether the hours are conducive to these students' needs, or

question how the racial/ethnic makeup of the tutors compares to that of the student body.

Equity-mindedness does not suggest that student behaviors, motivation, and attitudes are unrelated to their success. However, focusing on students alone, to the *exclusion* of understanding the ways in which institutions and practitioners can change their practices, policies, structures, and culture to more effectively promote student learning and outcomes, is equally problematic.

4. Equity-Minded Practitioners Rely on Evidence to Guide their Practice.

Equity-minded faculty, staff, and administrators rely on evidence to understand the practice- and policy-related factors that contribute to inequities experienced by their students. Data can help practitioners to truly understand the nature of problematic inequities in outcomes. Similarly, quantitative and qualitative data ought to guide the development and implementation of solutions to close those equity gaps. When practitioners observe equity gaps through the examination of disaggregated institutional data, the first inclination is often to identify "best practices" being enacted by other institutions and to implement them on their campus. Through our work, we have found that campuses who concentrate on identifying "off the shelf solutions" for inequitable outcomes face challenges in closing equity gaps. This best practices approach often presupposes the causes of inequities and prescribes solutions without a true understanding of the reasons that equity gaps exist.

Equity-minded practitioners use inquiry to gather evidence about the problem and to carefully examine existing practices to determine how they may be related to inequities. Additionally, equity-minded practitioners question their assumptions about students, recognize how stereotypes and implicit biases may harm racially minoritized students, and use disag-



gregated quantitative data and qualitative inquiry findings to guide their practice. By developing the capacity of faculty, staff, and administrators to conduct inquiry, gather data, and make appropriate improvements based on that data, institutions invest in “best practitioners.”

5. *Equity-Minded Practitioners Take Action to Eliminate Educational Inequities.*

The final principle of equity-mindedness relates to being action-oriented. Equity-minded practitioners feel empowered to take action toward closing equity gaps in educational outcomes. In addition to (1) raising awareness of racial inequities in outcomes, (2) building understanding of the connection between inequitable outcomes and systemic inequalities, and (3) cultivating evidence-based knowledge about the nature of inequities on their campuses, the inquiry process “creates a sense of purposeful agency” among practitioners, motivating them to act (Felix et al. 2015).

Equity-minded practitioners recognize the need to engage their colleagues in institutional equity efforts and devise ways to use their power in intentional ways to promote this engagement (Bishop 2014). Many faculty, administrators, and staff at CUE’s institutional partners have advanced equity on their campuses by leveraging their vested authority. For example, a department chair used his authority over the faculty review process to engage his colleagues in the regular review of course success data disaggregated by race/ethnicity. At another institution with whom CUE has partnered, the provost used her authority over the faculty hiring process to embed equity-mindedness into academic searches for the entire institution.

CONCLUSION

As detailed in this issue of *Peer Review*, the institutions involved in the *Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence* project faced varying equity challenges. The campus action plans reflect a variety of

approaches to addressing inequitable outcomes, including providing faculty and staff professional development opportunities, building institutional capacity for data collection and analysis, implementing high-impact practices, and revamping assessment practices. Though the participating institutions vary in their missions, student populations, and strategies for closing equity gaps, keeping the principles of equity-mindedness at the core of campus equity efforts will bolster their chances of success. ■

REFERENCES

- Bensimon, Estela Mara, and Lindsey Malcom. 2012. *Confronting Equity Issues on Campus: Implementing the Equity Scorecard in Theory and Practice*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Bishop, Robin. 2014. “Language and Identity in Critical Sensegiving: Journeys of Higher Education Equity Agents” (doctoral dissertation). University of Southern California.
- Carnevale, Anthony P., and Jeff Strohl. 2013. *Separate and Unequal: How Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege*. Washington, DC: Center on Education and the Workforce, Georgetown University.
- Center for Urban Education. n.d. “What Is Equity-Mindedness?” <http://cue.usc.edu/equity/equity-mindedness>.
- The College Board. 2014. *The 10th Annual AP® Report to the Nation*. New York, NY: The College Board.
- Dowd, Alicia C., and Estela M. Bensimon. 2015. *Engaging the Race Question: Accountability and Equity in U.S. Higher Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Eligon, John, and Robert Gebeloff. 2016. “Affluent and Black, and Still Trapped by Segregation.” *New York Times*. August 20. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/21/us/milwaukee-segregation-wealthy-black-families.html?_r=0.
- Felix, Eric R., Estela Mara Bensimon, Debbie Hanson, James Gray, and Libby Klingsmith. 2015. “Developing Agency for Equity-Minded Change.” *New Directions for Community Colleges* 172: 25–42. doi: 10.1002/cc.
- Gioia, Dennis A., and Peter P. Poole. 1984. “Scripts in Organizational Behavior.” *Academy of Management Review* 9 (3): 449–459. doi: 10.5465/AMR.1984.4279675.
- Perna, Laura W., and Joni E. Finney. 2014. *The Attainment Agenda: State Policy Leadership in Higher Education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Witham, Keith, Lindsey E. Malcom-Piqueux, Alicia C. Dowd, and Estela Mara Bensimon. 2015. *America’s Unmet Promise: The Imperative for Equity in Higher Education*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

AAC&U MEETINGS

NETWORK MEETINGS

Global Engagement and Social Responsibility: Higher Education’s Role in Addressing Global Crises

October 12–14, 2017
New Orleans, Louisiana

Transforming Undergraduate STEM Education: Discovery, Innovation, and the Value of Evidence

November 2–4, 2017
San Francisco, California

General Education and Assessment: Foundations for Democracy

February 15–17, 2018
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Diversity, Learning, and Student Success

March 22–24, 2018
San Diego, California

ANNUAL MEETING

Can Higher Education Recapture the Elusive American Dream?

January 24–27, 2018
Washington, DC

www.aacu.org/events