

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 forms the schemas of practitioners, leaders, policymakers, and others whose actions can make

As an Equity Scorecard participant at the University of Wisconsin stated, "Equity

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.

References

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