

# Equity Tank: A Model for Critical Inquiry and Change

Antoinette Newsome<sup>1</sup>, Aisha Folkes<sup>2</sup>, and Linda Marchlewski<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education, University of Maryland, College Park

<sup>2</sup> City Year, Boston, Massachusetts, United States

<sup>3</sup> EAB, Washington, DC, United States

While many student affairs departments are committed to addressing equity issues, they face limited capacity and lack institutionalized frameworks to implement equitable change at all levels on a cyclical and proactive basis. Equity Tank, a four-phase interactive model, allows all members of a department to question its policies, practices, and procedures to consider how they may negatively impact marginalized communities. Grounded in two practice models, the Equity Scorecard (Bensimon, 2012) and an Equity-Minded Inquiry graduate school assignment (Castillo-Montoya, 2015\*), this model requires practitioners to develop and implement tangible recommendations to address inequities within their respective departments.

Keywords: equity, marginalized identities, critical inquiry, equity-minded, student affairs practitioners

For decades, gaps in academic performance, retention, and graduation have persisted for students who are low-income, first-generation, and Students of Color (Espinosa et al., 2019). More specifically, for Black and Hispanic students at 4-year public institutions, 53.1% and 34.5%, respectively, left the institution without a conferred degree compared to 28.7% and 18.5% for White and Asian students (Espinosa et al., 2019).

Additionally, the gap in graduation rates has been widening between low-income students and their higher income counterparts (Cox, 2016). According to EAB (2019), 90% of low-income first-generation college students do not graduate within 6 years. Higher education institutions must adapt to the moment as demographics continue to shift and institutions become more racially diverse (National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, 2019); practitioners must ensure equitable access for all students regardless of identity. Through critical inquiry, interrogation of norms, and creation of tangible change, practitioners must continue to redesign and reshape our institutions into places where all students thrive.

In an effort to center equity-mindedness, this practice brief first describes common issues and barriers that exist when creating equitable change on college campuses, specifically within student affairs. Utilizing the Equity Tank model—a framework for critical inquiry, practitioners will be given a roadmap of tangible steps to promote structural change to demonstrate how student affairs practitioners and department leaders can hardwire equity-based inquiry in their respective functional areas.

student affairs, most practitioners receive insufficient training to understand complex multicultural issues and carry out these expectations (Pope et al., 2019). Creating and maintaining diverse and equitable practices on campus will not happen by the sheer will of well-intentioned professionals or programs. Equity must be the responsibility of all practitioners in all aspects of their work, which requires foundational knowledge on systems of oppression and their manifestations in higher education (Arminio et al., 2012). As a result, it is imperative that campuses provide on-going development of all staff, not just those with DEI explicitly written into their job duties.

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Student affairs jobs are known to be complex; practitioners wear a variety of hats, carry out emotionally intensive labor, often

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While some rendition of diversity, equity, or inclusion (DEI) is incorporated in almost all missions, values, and job descriptions in

classrooms together is not enough to ensure that all student's needs are met. Many degree completion efforts, including modes of support to increase connection and engagement, remain ineffective for those with marginalized identities (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir et al., 2012). Practitioners must problematize an institution's policies, practices, and procedures with a focus on structural change in addition to connection and engagement efforts. We must shift the responsibility from students and place the onus on institutions to address inequities and barriers.

### Implementing Equity-Focused Change in Student Affairs

When seeking to address equity gaps in higher education, many functional areas in student affairs lack the same process models, toolkits, and audits often found in academic affairs. Many equity-based models focus on case studies for academic departments and are faculty focused (Ching, 2018; Culver et al., 2021; O'Meara et al., 2021). One of the most impactful of these equity-minded inquiry processes, Equity Scorecard, operationalizes five principles for equitable change outlined by Bensimon et al. (2016):

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Participation in this process includes all department staff (i.e., directors, assistant directors, coordinators, administrative staff, etc.).

that are vital to building and sustaining momentum for organiza-

passions (Wenger, 2000). In addition, building Equity Tank into an annual cycle helps to ensure that participants are engaged in a continual process of critical inquiry, allowing them to apply this lens to their daily practice. Therefore, buy-in from department leadership is imperative if the cycle is to be sustained year after year to reinforce equity as a priority for the department.

While the department's piloting of Equity Tank focused on structural changes within the department's scope, more impactful change will require interdepartmental and interdivisional collaboration. Bensimon et al. (2016) emphasized that "equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle" (para. 4). Student affairs should not only adapt equity-minded process models found within academic affairs but should build coalitions with academic affairs as well to have a far-reaching impact on students. While Equity Tank was one attempt to adapt foundational equity-minded change models to student affairs, Bensimon et al. (2016) and other equity scholars could further expand the impact of their work by directly addressing how practitioners might adapt their models to new contexts. However, in the absence of this scholarship, we believe the Equity Tank model is broad enough to fit different types of industries beyond student affairs and college campuses (i.e., nonprofit, private agencies).

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Student affairs departments are central to increasing students' sense of belonging, providing holistic support structures, and increasing student engagement and agency. As a result, student affairs has the responsibility to address issues of inequity. In order to do so effectively, leaders must address the following questions:

- How do we develop equity-minded practitioners throughout our organization?
- How do we proactively embed efforts to create equity-minded change in our organizations' annual cycles given capacity constraints?
- How do we move beyond frameworks of cultural competency to address structural barriers?
- How can we apply the same theory to practice models found in academic affairs to address inequities within the domain of student affairs?

The Equity Tank process is one way university stakeholders and practitioners can critically analyze their role in perpetuating systems of oppression on their campuses. Through engagement with the process, participants also have the opportunity to develop their own social justice knowledge, awareness, and skills. Moreover, it facilitates on-going collective and critical reflection, resulting in tangible structural change to remove barriers for marginalized students despite capacity constraints. Practitioners and departments all across campus must work to strengthen partnerships, build broad coalitions, and include both academic and student affairs in the process. This collective effort to embed critical inquiry throughout systems of higher education is what can actualize equity on college campuses.

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