Addressing the Conceptual Challenges of Equity Work: A Blueprint for Getting Started

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What is equity? I want to begin this chapter by asking what it means to think about equity in a particularly difficult social moment, one of widening economic inequality and social fracture. A seemingly obvious question, but perhaps this is why it begs further attention. Many of us routinely use the word equity, participate in and facilitate programs that aim to increase equity, and work for institutions that espouse commitments to equity. But what does equity really mean? And, conversely, what might it mean to think about equity? I am interested in how we think about equity and how this thinking influences practice: how it influences our perceptions of students, our interactions with students, and the programs we design to help facilitate their success.

Although it is rather easy to agree with broad rhetorical commitments to a more just and equitable society, the barriers to practicing equity are many. In fact, equity-oriented practices are difficult to engage because of a complex system of sociopolitical and economic relations. Thus, walking the walk, so to speak, requires a thoughtful understanding of how community colleges are situated within a larger social landscape and accordingly, how community college practice affects the scope of opportunities made available to students on campus. In their latest book, Dowd and Bensimon (2015) contend that equity can be thought of as a standard. Equity as a standard can then be used in community college practice to judge “whether a state of affairs is just or unjust” (p. 9). Thinking about equity as a standard is useful because it surfaces important considerations related to ideas of fairness. What do we believe that people deserve, and why? In the context of community college practice, what do we believe that our students deserve, and why?
Although our individual answers may slightly differ, I believe that we all want students to be successful and we want them to be provided with the tools and resources to thrive. We know, however, that not all students—or potential students—are provided with what they need in order to realize their full potential and this is really at the heart of equity. What I’d like to propose in this first chapter is that it is not only important for us to design programming around equity but also to think deeply about what equity means, what it might look like, and what it might feel like on community college campuses. Practice is greatly influenced by the way we think about equity and what we think equity means. Because equity is a contextually dependent construct, how we consider that context—that is, where we decide to look and what we decide to see—greatly matters. In fact, I might go so far as to say that vision is the most important element of engaging equity-oriented practice: to see our current circumstances for what they are and then to envision a reality-based path toward equitable change. Accordingly, my purpose in this chapter is to focus on vision and in so doing, encourage a rethinking of commonplace approaches, attitudes, and assumptions toward persistent challenges of disparity in community college spaces and to outline common pitfalls in attempting equity work.

What Is Equity (and What Is It Not)?

Popular rhetoric around difference in U.S. higher education routinely includes buzzwords such as “diversity” and “inclusion,” but these terms are not synonymous with equity. Issues of diversity and inclusion are important concepts to understand, to be certain, but they are not the same thing as understanding equity. To understand equity is to understand power and the ways in which power operates throughout society.

Power may feel like an intimidating subject, but it need not be. Understanding power is really about seeing how privilege and disadvantage operate throughout society and, therefore, how these operations affect individuals and groups of people over time. Concepts like privilege and disadvantage emphasize structural and institutional patterns that, when examined from a macro level, position individuals and groups of people in particular advantageous and/or disadvantageous ways throughout society. In the context of community college practice, privilege and disadvantage can be seen in the ways that students interact with and are positioned by the resources made available to them: financial aid policies, academic advising practices, student support services, and everyday interactions with college administrators, faculty, and staff, among other resources.

Plainly stated, equity in higher education is the idea that students from historically and contemporarily marginalized and minoritized communities have access to what they need in order to be successful. This is not a radical proposition and in the abstract, it is probably something with which we can all agree. Providing students with what they need in order to be successful
is not simply reasonable, it’s our job. However, understanding equity as a function of power can quickly become complicated; what if we aren’t quite sure what students need? How do we know if we are adequately providing students with what they need? Because some students’ needs are different from others’, is it fair to give different kinds of resources to different groups of students?

The answers to these questions are varied, but asking them is an important step in the process of engaging equity-oriented practices in community colleges. The unfortunate reality is that we do not spend enough time asking these kinds of questions and as a result, we may not have the opportunity to think deeply about how to achieve equity. Accordingly, our attempts to appropriately address disparities in student access, experience, and outcomes may be misguided.

Because equity is about power, to engage equity-oriented practices in community college contexts means to work toward changing powerful systems: systemic practices, regulations, norms, and habits of the institution. This is difficult work, at least in part, because it can be hard for the individuals performing habits and norms to see them. In order for policy and programming to be equity oriented, they need to be aimed at transforming permanent institutional assumptions and practices that privilege some student groups and not others. An emphasis on diversity or inclusion falls short of this aim.

Commitments to diversity or inclusion do not require a critical attention to power in the same way as equity. For example, we can appeal to notions of diversity and never disrupt the practices that make it difficult for lower income students to persist. Or, we can commit to notions of inclusivity without ever addressing hostile campus climates for students of Color. Or, we can celebrate difference through ceremonial gatherings and special weeks dedicated to disenfranchised groups without adequately addressing deeply held assumptions about particular student communities, including undocumented students; lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer (LGBTQ+) students; or pregnant and parenting students; among others. Certainly, these kinds of events serve a purpose on campus and I am not arguing that we need to eliminate them, but we need to recognize them for what they are and what they do, as well as where they fall short.

I would like for us to move us away from ideas of diversity and inclusion, not because they do not matter, but because they are simply not enough to address entrenched disparity in higher education. We need a politics of equity in community college practice that moves beyond simply increasing numerical representation of underrepresented groups or celebrating difference, because the mere presence of difference does not equal equity. Normative structural and institutional patterns that place underrepresented students in disadvantaged positions must be addressed, and the only way to do this is to see them for what they are and understand how they operate. Certainly numerical representation is one aspect of this
work, but creating the capacity to successfully and humanely serve and support growing numbers of underrepresented students should be the ultimate institutional goal.

Challenges in Doing Equity Work

There are a number of challenges in transforming community college spaces to become more equitable. In what follows, I focus on three broad challenges that are common throughout higher education in general, as well as community college practice. My fundamental assumption in providing the following challenges is that equity is about power. Many of the following examples may alleviate short-term issues; however, they collectively neglect to address structural conditions that perpetuate inequity. The following dispositions all function to alleviate the immediate, which is surely an important component of working toward equity but not enough to engage transformational change. Falling into any of the following thinking patterns ultimately works to sustain inequity in the long term because the following habits do not disrupt the root causes of inequity: unfair distributions of power.

Focusing on the Student Instead of the Institution. Throughout higher education there exists a commonsensical culture as it relates to addressing disparity. If a group of students is not performing well in developmental reading courses, for example, the popular response is to target individual students for academic intervention programming. If women are underrepresented in advanced math courses, the likely response is to recruit more women into such programs. Likewise, if African-American students are not persisting and completing at the same rates as their White peers, then a program is typically designed to assist individual African-American students in completing. The institutional responses to student failure rates, issues of racialized academic achievement, or gendered representation overwhelmingly privilege intervention programming aimed at assisting individual students.

Although targeting individual student communities is perhaps one component of working toward equity, doing so is only a partial fix to a more complex problem. It makes sense to target individual student communities only if individual students are the problem. What I’ve tried to point out thus far is that individual student communities are not the problem, but rather the way we tend to think about equity is the problem. As practitioners, we need to look in different directions in order to see more complex problems and imagine more appropriate solutions. In essence, we need to relearn where to look and what to see.

Because intervention programs aimed at individuals tend only to scratch the surface of the deeper work that needs to be done, important examinations of institutional thinking and practice may not occur. Programs that target individual students can be thought of as surface-level
programming because they do not interrupt more permanent institutional practices. In fact, surface-level programming may assist in the maintenance of inequitable structures because such programming fails to disrupt normative routines and processes that perpetually position individual students as “in need” of assistance. The important point of consideration here is this: who is being blamed for educational neglect (popularly known as “under-preparation”) and consequently targeted for intervention programming? If individual students rather than institutional structures (e.g., policies, practices, and people) are the focus, then even well-intended intervention programming may contribute to the maintenance of inequity.

Thinking About Students From a Deficit Perspective. One of the most common ways that underrepresented students are conceptualized in postsecondary education is through a deficit lens. There is a deeply rooted history in the United States related to deficit framing of underrepresented students in higher education, particularly students of Color, women, and lower income students. Valencia (2010) refers to the practice of deficit framing in education as educational deficit thinking, which has negative consequences for students and is incongruent with equity-oriented practices.

Educational deficit thinking occurs when institutions, through their policies, practices, language, and thinking, blame individual students for what they perceivably lack. Popular examples include referring to students as “at risk” for failure or labeling students as “underprepared” (Castro, 2014). The problem with locating failure within individual students is that it lets off the hook other institutional and systemic factors such as inadequate programming at the postsecondary level, underresourced secondary schools, and underdeveloped viable career pathways. When individual students are blamed for not having access to academic preparedness and then consequently targeted for intervention programming in college, they become problems to be fixed.

The error in this perspective is that it fails to account for why students may arrive on community college campuses with disparate access to sufficient academic preparation. Without attention toward the structural conditions that position students in disadvantaged ways, programming will always be necessary to assist individual students because it is not aimed at challenging the conditions that contribute to their disadvantage. Programs that exist to assist academically “underprepared” students or those who are “at risk” for failure make explicit the goals of the program: change the student to align with the standards of the institution. Certainly, we want students academically proficient and positioned to perform well academically, but intervention programs that are designed to target students’ labeled deficiencies are limited in their ability to turn around and ask the same questions of the institution: How and in what ways is the institution underprepared to successfully serve students? In what ways is the institution “at risk” for failing students?
Neglecting Institutional Climate. A consequence of the previous two challenges is that the institutional environment is neglected when energy is narrowly targeted toward individual students. It is important to think about the larger campus environment into which underrepresented and underserved students are recruited, and this includes both the academic and social spaces that they will navigate. Campus climate (Hurtado, 1992; Hurtado & Ruiz, 2012) is a useful construct to consider when thinking about equity.

Campus climate brings together the social and institutional contexts that affect the ways that students experience colleges and universities. Oftentimes, colleges are unaware of how underrepresented students experience campus and collegiate environments. As a result, well-intended practitioners may be recruiting underrepresented students into hostile or unhealthy environments where students encounter bias, discrimination, and/or feelings of exclusion. It is important to consider how underrepresented students may experience the institution as members of a minoritized group. Students interact with a number of individuals who work for the institution through normative processes, such as registering for classes, meeting with an advisor, attending classes, and interacting in social spaces. It is the responsibility of the institution to ensure that the individuals representing the college are committed to equity and that routine practices—including habits, dispositions, norms, and regulations—reflect this commitment.

Focusing on equitable student outcomes (see Felix et al., Chapter 3) requires that practitioners are attentive to the environment into which they are welcoming underrepresented and traditionally undervalued student communities. Increasing equitable outcomes for students means that we also want to know about students’ experiences and interactions with faculty, staff, administrators, and peers on campus or in an online classroom environment. Faculty, staff, and administrators need continual education and new knowledge to help support the success of students who may experience the world and the institution differently than they do. As Rodriguez points out in this volume, practitioners need to know that equity is an institutional value and they should be given the knowledge and resources to work toward this goal. Understanding how underrepresented students experience the climate of the institution is an important place to begin this work.

Relearning Where to Look and What to See

There can never be a single story, there are only ways of seeing.

Arunghati Roy (2002)
The challenges described here stem from a commonsensical and historically rooted culture in higher education as it relates to widening access for traditionally excluded communities. Although popular, these approaches are ineffective in addressing disparity in the long term. Part of our responsibility as practitioners, educators, and scholars is to recognize the work we need to do in order to transform institutions into spaces committed to equity. As I mentioned previously, this work begins by the way that we see things: where we choose to look and what we choose to see.

Felix et al. and Pickel and Bragg (this volume) each provide examples of shifting practitioners’ gaze and questioning problematic assumptions. They provide examples and concrete tools to use in working through familiar ways of looking at problems toward more imaginative and bold approaches to justice. At the heart of their suggestions lie useful questions that can help in relearning where to look and avoiding some of the common thinking traps of doing equity work: Are individual students being blamed? Are problems being identified before knowing all of the information? Are issues of institutional climate being considered? These types of questions effectively remove the emphasis of equity away from an individual frame and position it as an institutional one, a key component of engaging equity work.

In the introduction I asked what it might mean to think about equity because thinking about equity beyond program design should push us to (re)consider practice. We may be encouraged to recognize how we see the world and, perhaps, to think about how others might see it, too. At the very least, I believe thinking about equity encourages us to examine concepts like privilege and disadvantage and why some individuals have access to opportunities and others do not. Reflecting upon these questions is the necessary groundwork for equity-oriented practices.

When we desire a more fair and balanced society, one where resources are more equitably distributed and accessible to those with the least economic and political power, we appeal to a fundamental ideal: justice. When we imagine what it might be like to walk in someone else’s shoes—to perhaps experience life in unfamiliar ways, we humanize the sociopolitical conditions that comprise the status quo, the very conditions to which we have become so accustomed, such as gross educational inequity along the lines of race and class throughout all levels of education.

Systemic structures, such as entrenched poverty or inequality of educational opportunity, are not insurmountable, but we must see them for what they are and recognize that they need not be permanent fixtures of our society. They can be transformed and community colleges play a crucial role in this transformation. But, because inequity quite literally surrounds us, working for a more just society can be an arduous undertaking. It is easy to become jaded or feel that what we do in everyday practice cannot possibly make a difference.
But it does. Certainly, we cannot engage mass change overnight. But, we can do small things with conviction that ultimately make a difference at our respective institutions. This work can begin by recognizing how we see our students and their circumstances and asking, quite frankly, what we think they deserve.

Conclusion

We do not exist independently from one another, even if our world is organized in ways to make us believe otherwise. Once we accept this fact, we can engage our work with students with compassion instead of pity and understanding instead of judgment. We can see that we are not able to fix everything, but that we can work across coalitions of difference and use the power we do have to create change. As educators and practitioners, we must see ourselves as part of a larger picture and recognize that what we choose to do at our respective institutions is just as important as what we choose not to do. Our work matters not simply for those student communities who we want to assist in being successful but for all of us.

We must locate our work somewhere along the spectrum, where students have the individual agency to overcome great odds and where we, as equity-oriented practitioners, recognize and work against the very real structural obstacles that stand in their way. We need a more meaningful, long-lasting solution to systemic inequity in community college spaces, one that recognizes that the success of any equity-oriented program should ultimately be its own abolition. The fact that we continue to need programming aimed at increasing equity means that we still have a lot of work to do.

I am inspired by the idea that a more fair and just world is possible. By positioning equity as a function of power, we can better see the origins of systemic inequity and understand their durability. We can then design more effective programming that gets at the source of the problem, not simply its all-too-familiar symptoms.

References


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