INSIDE HIGHER ED
(https://www.insidehighered.com)

Is the work of faculty members in the classroom the next equity challenge? (essay)

Submitted by Estela Mara Bensimon on August 26, 2016 - 3:00am

I've been asked for years why I start many of my higher education talks with equity. Today, the word is trending, even among those who advised me against using it. While that is progress, we have to be careful not to confuse talk with change.

Historically, we in higher education have been really good at producing reports on inequality and explaining these inequalities away, but really bad at making equity a priority. And we haven't made changes in the classroom that are necessary to really make a difference.

The fact that unequal outcomes are such an enduring characteristic of higher education -- especially for Latino, black, Native American and underserved Asian-American students -- is evidence of our poor record of both talking about *and producing* equity.

In California, for example, we tend to view numbers that show fewer black and Latino students admitted to public flagship universities like the University of California campuses in Los Angeles and Berkeley, and fewer blacks and Latinos earning a degree, as unfortunate but inevitable. Between 2007 and 2015, the higher education attainment gap between whites and Latinos actually grew by 2.2 percentage points, from a 22.1 percentage point gap to a 24.3 percentage point gap. The gap for blacks grew by 0.3 percentage points.

Closing that gap is not going to be easy. Most of these students are poor and the first in their families to attend college. They were deprived of opportunities to be ready for college. But when they don't do well, they are blamed for being underprepared, for not seeking help and for not taking advantage of faculty office hours. Despite having been failed by segregated and underresourced schools, such students are seen as the authors of their unequal outcomes.

Some states seem to get the scope of the challenge and are beginning to show the nation how to move from talking about equity to making it a priority. For instance, California's last three state budgets have included significant financial support for community colleges to help diminish the equity gaps in student success. Those funds are part of a plan [1] to close equity gaps in five indicators of student success: access, basic skills, course completion, degree attainment and transfer. The budget for this equity work has increased from $70 million in 2014-15 to $155 million this year -- and the same funding level has been proposed for 2016-17. Community colleges are using these funds in a variety of ways that increase support to students of color. For example, East Los Angeles Community College is using a portion of the

money to create the Latina Completion and Transfer Academy Program. San Diego Mesa College is sponsoring professional development for all faculty members on training and teaching college men of color.

Colorado's higher education master plan [2] offers another example. Goal No. 3 of the plan is "Enhance access to, and through, postsecondary education to ensure that the system reflects the changing demographics of the state while reducing attainment gaps among students from underserved communities."

But here's the truth: just as plants in an untended garden will fail to take root and then wither and die, so, too, will these policies.

I don't say this to be cynical. Nor do I think higher education leaders and practitioners are willfully ineffective or don't want to do the right thing. But these polices *will* fail unless we engage faculty members and administrators in changing themselves and their own institutions. They must ask why their practices or teaching methods work better for white students than for students of color.

To me, this is the untold story of "first-generation equity practitioners" teaching in higher education. For example, I view the 62 percent of California community college faculty who are white [3] as first-generation equity practitioners who need to learn how to be equity minded. Nationally [4], 79 percent of full-time faculty members are white, while 6 percent are black, 5 percent are Hispanic and 10 percent are Asian/Pacific Islanders.

Higher education faculty members everywhere must recognize and concede that their practices are failing to create success for too many students. They need to see that their implicit biases about race and ethnicity often prevent them from viewing students who are not like themselves as college material.

And it can be done. With the right training and support, faculty members engaged in this work take actions to identify and reverse patterns of failure -- their students' and their own. We are seeing progress firsthand in our own work, which focuses on remediating colleges so they are able to educate Latinos and blacks as well as they educate white and more economically privileged students.

James Gray, the chair of the math department at the Community College of Aurora [5] in Colorado, for instance, changed practices after looking at math data by course and instructor, disaggregated by race and ethnicity. It was clear that some faculty members were successful and others were not. With guided support to help him observe instructor-student interaction, he saw how faculty members talked to and greeted students, whom they paid attention to and whom they ignored, and whether feedback to students was supportive or alienating.

Through peer-to-peer conversations, math instructors became collectively conscious that their behaviors, particularly toward students of color, conveyed indifference, lack of caring and even fear. On seeing the contradictions between their behaviors and their professional values as educators, all but one faculty member made changes to be more responsive to students of color. Instead of being color-blind they became more color conscious; rather than waiting for students of color to seek help they developed help-giving practices.

Those small changes helped faculty members forge validating relationships with students of color. For example, using our Equity Scorecard [6]'s Syllabus Review protocol, faculty members became aware that their syllabi, rather than supporting students' success, taxed

their self-worth by screaming rules and telling them all the ways in which they could fail the class. The review of syllabi was a catalyst for deeper discussions about teaching and reflection on how instructors' language and everyday behaviors influence classroom racial climates.

Gray, in his role as department chair, now looks at mathematics course-level data, disaggregated by race and ethnicity, and by instructor, discussing results with faculty individually to come up with strategies to resolve disparities of up to 35 percentage points. Instructors have adopted equity goals and they know how many more students by race and ethnicity need to succeed to close the gaps. After the implementation of the Equity Scorecard that we at the Center for Urban Education use to track progress, the college algebra pass rates [7] for blacks improved from 66 percent in 2014 to 77 percent in 2015 and from 66 percent to 83 percent among Hispanics.

He also realized that in 10 years as department chair, he had never hired an African-American to teach a college-level math course. He even realized his recruiting strategies put candidates of color at a disadvantage. He now asks job candidates how they would explain their course syllabus on day one of class in order to see if that candidate's approach is conducive to an equity-focused classroom.

The Community College of Aurora is part of a growing effort to translate high-level policy goals into campus- and faculty-level goals that can be implemented and measured by race and ethnicity to improve retention and graduation results. The improvements achieved at Aurora suggest that structural changes such as course redesign or acceleration are necessary but insufficient. The success of such efforts depends greatly on the motivation of faculty to take action. The Aurora story makes clear that math faculty who engage in a structured race-conscious examination of data that is close to their instructional practices can develop agency for change.

The combination of underprepared students and underprepared faculty members is the perfect storm. When campuses change the way they serve students of color, however, a fundamental shift in thinking and approach occurs that moves us beyond talk and closer to real equity.

Estela Mara Bensimon is a professor of higher education and director of the Center for Urban Education [8] at the University of Southern California Rossier School Of Education. Her Twitter handle is @ebensimon.

Section:
Diversity [9]
Editorial Tags:
Racial groups [10]
Teaching [11]
Image Source:
iStock/Hongqi Zhang

Source URL: https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/08/26/work-faculty-members-classroom-next-equity-challenge-essay?width=775&height=500&iframe=true

Links:
[1] http://www.ccleague.org/files/public/Publications/EquityReport2015.pdf
[2] http://highered.colorado.gov/Publications/General/StrategicPlanning/MasterPlan2012/Master_Plan_Final.pdf
[3] http://datamart.cccco.edu/Faculty-Staff/Staff_Demo.aspx

[4] http://chronicle.com/interactives/fac-diversity
[5] https://www.ccaurora.edu/
[6] http://cue.usc.edu/tools/the-equity-scorecard/
[7] https://cue.usc.edu/files/2016/01/Data_Aurora_TrendData-Before-and-After-EIE-with-CUE-V4.pdf
[8] http://cue.usc.edu/research/colorado-equity-in-excellence/
[9] https://www.insidehighered.com/news/focus/diversity
[10] https://www.insidehighered.com/taxonomy/term/232
[11] https://www.insidehighered.com/taxonomy/term/121

undefined
undefined