



CLOSING THOUGHTS FROM OUR PARTNER

Reflections on the Meaning of Equity and the Practice of Equity-Mindedness

ESTELA MARA BENSIMON, *Professor of Higher Education in the Rossier School of Education and Director of the Center for Urban Education, University of Southern California*

I have thoroughly enjoyed reading about these thirteen campuses' efforts to address equity gaps in educational outcomes for student populations that have not been served equitably by their colleges. I am particularly pleased to see that the term "equity" has been embraced so readily. I say this because, not that long ago, "equity talk" was discouraged as polarizing. In higher education, we take pride in serving all students well, and some view the focus on equity as contradictory because it encourages a focus on the educational outcomes of particular student populations. Language is one of the most important tools in institutional change, as it serves the purpose of introducing new ways of thinking, new definitions of what matters, and new visions of institutional aspirations. Language is also important as a means of legitimizing contested values and priorities and for revealing the injustices created by ostensibly neutral and fair structures and practices.

I view the Association of American Colleges and Universities *Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence: Campus-Based Strategies for Student Success* project as an opportunity to transform these colleges into institutions that, when measured by the standard of racial equity, will be identified as high performing. Achieving this status, as you know, is challenging; however, it is not impossible. Moreover, having a clear goal—to perform more justly for minoritized students who have historically been failed by higher education—provides direction and purpose. In response to these campuses' reports about their initiatives, I provide three recommendations to support future equity efforts.

DEFINE RACIAL/ETHNIC EQUITY

The word equity is included in all of the campuses' reports, a sign that shows an understanding that equity is different from diversity and that it is different from equality. To safeguard the term "equity" from being trivialized, it needs to be defined very specifically at the level of populations (e.g., students, faculty, leaders, staff, boards) and at the level of outcomes (e.g., access, retention, high-impact practices, faculty positions). Adopting a definition of racial equity does not preclude adopting definitions of other kinds of equity, including gender and income equity; however, these types of equity need to be treated separately because inequities based on race and ethnicity originate from unique historical, sociocultural, and sociopolitical circumstances, including enslavement, colonization, appropriation of territory, and linguistic hegemony.

SAY "NO" TO EUPHEMISTIC LANGUAGE

To achieve racial equity, it is necessary to clarify and identify who is experiencing equity and inequity. Terms such as "URM" (underrepresented minority), "at risk," "first generation," "minority," and "non-white" undermine institutional transformation when used without a deeper examination of specific experiences and needs of students from different racial groups. When employed euphemistically, such terminology can render racial stratification among the institution's haves and have-nots invisible while establishing cultural barriers to honest and direct talk about race.

PUT EQUITY-MINDEDNESS INTO PRACTICE

The Center for Urban Education defines equity-mindedness from the perspective that racism is an endemic condition that we reproduce systematically through routines we believe to be neutral.



Equity-mindedness entails being race conscious in a critical way, as opposed to being color-blind. A critical perspective means that practitioners and leaders are cognizant that racial inequities are produced by everyday practices that systematically disadvantage minoritized populations. Equity-minded individuals have the courage to make racism visible and discussable. Equity-minded individuals recognize whiteness as a racial identity that accrues privilege and power. Now that equity-mindedness has become part of these campuses' vocabulary, it is important to understand its meaning and how to apply it in projects. An equity-minded strategy might be to interrogate routine practices by asking, "In what ways does this practice support the success of minoritized students?"