

Equity's Unspoken Dilemmas: Facing Trade-Offs for More Intentional Practice

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"We are committed to equity."

"We strive to close equity gaps in student outcomes."

"Our college is committed to an equitable and inclusive environment."

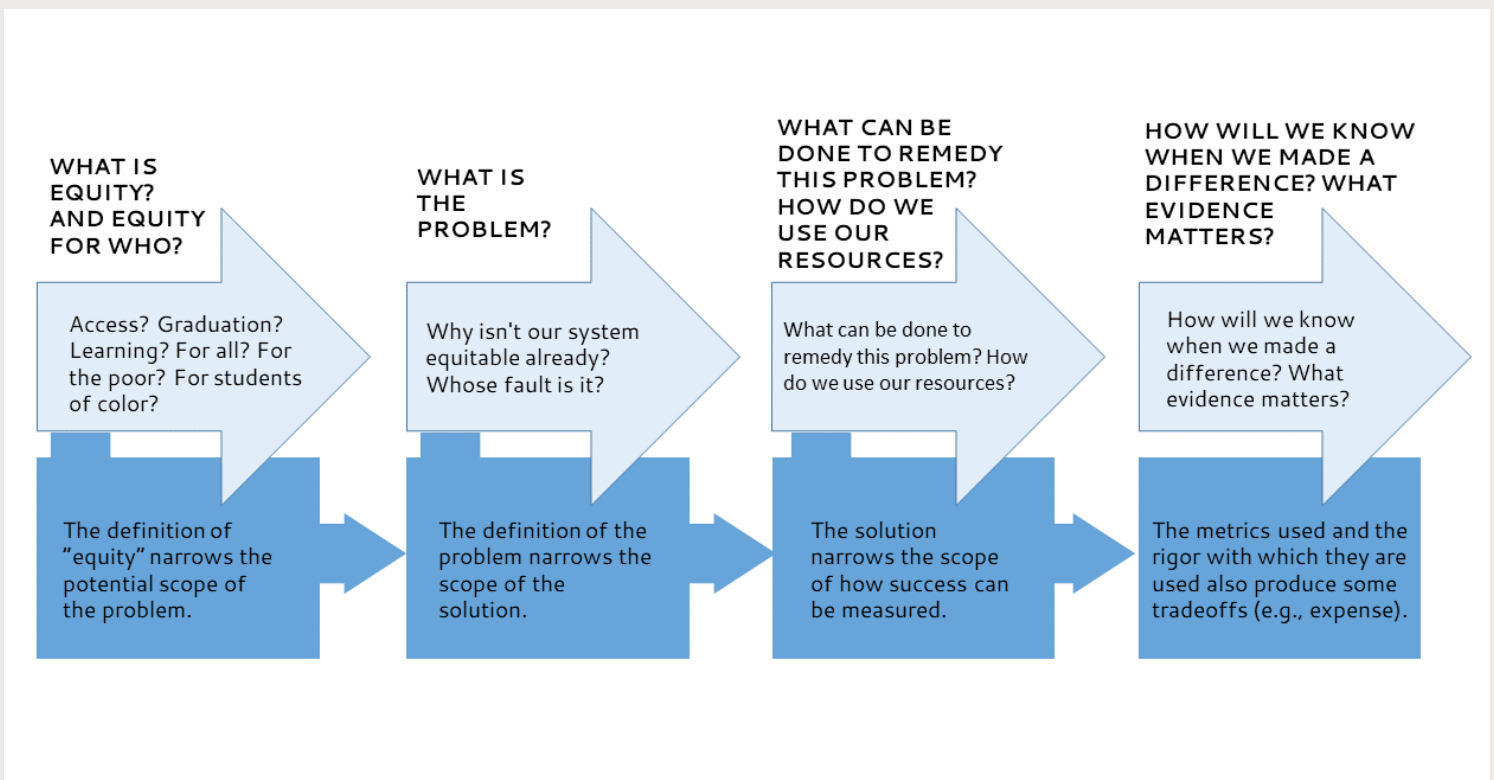
At this moment in 2019, most community college researchers, practitioners, and educators have either come across such statements or work in environments with multiple committees, initiatives, and departments dedicated to such purposes. But what is "equity?" Moreover, how important is it that we collectively define not only what equity is, but also how we might achieve it? While equity's definition and use varies from one context to another, it is also a concept that many practitioners and administrators employ within their own organizations with intentional flexibility. In these cases, they emphasize that it may not be appropriate or possible to agree on a single definition. While there are certain political advantages to agreeing to take a broad view, tactically this may not be a recipe for successful organizational change. This brief will provide an overview of the logical implications of different models of equity, an introduction to an empirical project that validates the material effects of varied equity definitions, and a framework for considering the trade-offs inherent in our collective work to mobilize equity in our own environments.

I am a former community college practitioner. And now as a researcher, I use empirical cases to help me understand the effects of the way an organization centers and defines equity in its work. For example, is equity about focusing on quality services for all students? Or is equity about investigating and targeting systemic privileges denied to students of color? Or should we be "color blind" because equity is about addressing economic disadvantages? What do we try to deliver when we think of a quality education for "traditional" students, and how does this change when we shift to thinking about what underserved students need? Is that equitable? These are just a few of the expansive questions that can underlie the "equity" nomenclature, and while any of them can be "equity," they have radically different implications for educational practice.

Research in fields as broad as social psychology, political science, and organizational sociology tell us that the way we frame and talk about problems will shape the outcomes produced. Frames operate to focus actions on, or exclude from vision, specific social problems (Béland, 2009; Benford & Snow, 2000; Gray, Purdy, & Ansari, 2014; Hand, Penuel, & Gutiérrez, 2013; Snow, Benford, McCammon, Hewitt, & Fitzgerald, 2014; Surel, 2000). For example, even under the auspices of addressing “equity,” some frames authorize practitioners to award resources to the most “qualified” students (meritocracy), while others target based on need (compensatory redistribution) (Berrey, 2015; Espinoza, 2007; Jencks, 1988). As such, the operational definitions of equality at the societal and organizational levels are powerful forces in education reform. This rather lofty statement can be illustrated using a logic model. This model demonstrates the connections between equity frames, the identified problem, the constructed solution, and the development of evaluation metrics.

The combination of these four elements constitute, for the most part, an “intervention” as we refer to it in education.

Logic Model for Operationalizing Equality



This model demonstrates that all potential problem, solution, and evaluation combinations are in part contingent on how we define “equity.”

An Empirical Case

One piece of my current empirical work drives home the importance of “equity’s” definition. In a study of a federal grantmaking agency dedicated to creating more equitable systems in postsecondary education, I found a causal relationship between the organization’s activated definition of equity and the way it uses funds to effect change in higher education. In 2013, this agency shifted its frame for action and, in particular, its stance on equity along two primary axes. From 1995 until 2013, the agency focused on general themes like improvement, learning, and pedagogical experimentation to benefit “all students” in a system with an individual, optional priority focused on access and diversity themes. The Obama-era program shifted the agency’s focus in favor of a class- and race-conscious frame that foregrounded the needs of minoritized students across all grantmaking priorities. Deceptively, this move to center minoritized populations was accompanied by a shift away from emphasis on learning outcomes and in favor of outcomes targeting international economic competitiveness that would benefit all citizens. Indeed, the name of the initiative referenced the need to better compete with other countries to hold the highest population of college degree holders as a proxy for economic well-being. The initiative argued that this goal could not be met without “closing the gap” of minoritized college completion.

My analysis revealed, however, that the shift did not pivot solely around the identification of a more specific target population. A simultaneous and deeply intertwined qualitative change is evident in the analysis of grant guidelines: The agency shifted from its long-held emphasis on innovation and creativity for the purpose of improving learning, pedagogy, and other closely held values in postsecondary education to an emphasis on rigorous evaluation (e.g., experimental or quasi-experimental methods) and efforts to build evidence using quantified outcomes (e.g., college completion, employment rates).

This policy change could be interpreted at face value as simply a shift in favor of investing in benefits to minoritized populations. My findings strongly suggest that the new position on equity had its intended effect in terms of target beneficiaries: Institutions that served more students of color and low-income students did indeed benefit from this program than in prior years, controlling for myriad endogenous and contextual factors. While this may seem almost intuitive, it is critical to put this finding in context. This agency had always been tasked with this same purpose—to address problems in postsecondary education for “underserved” students. And yet, the organizations predominantly serving these populations were at a disadvantage in their likelihood to receive grant funding during the agency’s two decades of operation prior to the Obama-era change.

However, the interpretation of the effect of this policy frame on beneficiaries is challenged when turning to other analyses. Ultimately, in this new era, research universities with moderate or high prestige still held onto their relative advantage. Indeed, the benefit delivered to minority-serving institutions (MSIs) in this new period came from investments in doctoral-granting MSIs, while MSI community colleges received no additional benefits. From the perspective of service to the most vulnerable U.S. populations, this finding is nonintuitive as the very institutions (e.g., community colleges) that, on average, serve the most minoritized students do not see significant benefit (and even some significant negative effects) of the new policy. Coupled with the findings regarding minoritized representation among award recipients, there is important causal evidence that this change did not simply democratize the distribution of awards by delivering funds to the most

disadvantaged students at the institutions that primarily serve them (i.e., community colleges), but that particular types of organizations serving these students received preference (i.e., research universities). This upholds, in critical ways, the idea that trade-offs are inherent in the way we define equity. If we center nondominant populations, but also rapidly expand evaluation requirements, then programs, contexts, innovations, and the number of students served will all be affected.

This contradiction brings to light the limitations that socially constructed categories may carry with them into the intervention process. In previous eras, when this agency selected organizations that were predominantly white and middle class with higher resources, more liberal conceptions of student learning, pedagogical experimentation, civic engagement, and global knowledge predominated in this agency's goals. These expansive values did not withstand the pressures that a justice-oriented emphasis on minoritized populations demanded. Instead, in this new era, questions of learning, pedagogy, and innovation were sidelined in favor of measurable outcomes expected to make quantifiable contributions to the American economy. Did the leaders in charge of redeveloping this frame intend for learning, pedagogy, and innovation to disappear when the time came to preference nondominant students? Probably not, but the trade-off is apparent in retrospect.

Considering Trade-Offs

While this empirical case provides evidence that the positioning and definition of equity matters to an organization's work, how can we take this up in practice? My current findings suggest that decisions about how we define and operationalize equity have real implications for how we design and invest in organizational change. If this is the case, avoiding the task of defining what we mean when we say "equity" is ultimately a refusal to address dilemmas and trade-offs inherent in our decision spaces. The purpose of this brief is not to dictate what definition an organization should use but to highlight the affordances of looking directly at the dilemmas to manage them strategically. A dilemma, by definition, can be managed but not necessarily eliminated. In other words, we will always have trade-offs as we use scarce resources to invest in student success and alleviate systemic inequities, but facing these trade-offs allows us to make intentional choices to maximize our ultimate preferences.

The figure on the next page illustrates such dilemmas. Although this list is certainly incomplete, it is a starting point to demonstrate ideas commonly associated with equity that are constantly in a state of tension. Any committee, initiative, strategic plan, or individual educator dedicated to achieving a more equitable environment for students operates from an implicit and value-laden approach to doing such work. The resulting set of constructs, some of which are represented in the table, create a lens through which we see problems and a litmus test for possible, worthwhile solutions. Oftentimes and for myriad reasons, this lens is not intentionally constructed (or deconstructed) for the task at hand. In this way, by saying "equity," we may collectively operate from varied and even competing understandings of our ultimate goal or preferred strategies. Similarly, by invoking "equity" without aligning that term with core values, we may even invoke or encourage solutions not at all in line with our greatest hopes. Avoiding head-on discussions aimed at defining "equity" may have advantages (e.g., preserving harmony). However, there may be material and measurable consequences to employing vague concepts in the midst of the valuable work of improving student success. As such, the work of collectively coming to terms with equity definitions and preferences may offer long-term advantages to making strategic change.

Explicit and Implicit Dilemmas Relevant to Action on "Equity"

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