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Advancing Practitioner Understandings of Equity in Illinois Community Colleges

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Equity-minded leadership is critical to closing equity gaps for historically marginalized student populations within higher education systems (Malcom-Piquex & Bensimon, 2017). Pathways to Results (PTR) is an outcomes-focused, equity-guided process to improve student transition to and through postsecondary education and into employment. PTR began with six pilot sites in 2009 and has since expanded to over 100 projects throughout the Illinois community college system. Built on the foundational work of the Center on Urban Education at the University of Southern California, PTR supports community college practitioners in understanding obstacles to student success and implementing changes in both policy and practice toward advancing equitable outcomes (Office of Community College Research and Leadership, 2019).

The Illinois Context

Illinois is home to the nation's first community college, Joliet Junior College. The public community college system in the state is comprised of 48 community colleges that serve nearly one million students each year (Illinois Community College Board, 2017). Higher education literature has called on community college practitioners to adopt an equity-based agenda that meets the academic and social needs of their diverse populations (Bensimon 2005; Boggs & McPhail, 2016). Given existing gaps in educational attainment, advancing racial equity in completion rates for students in community colleges should be a priority

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PTR participation is identified as presenting opportunities to facilitate what can be challenging talks on equity.

HIGHLIGHTS

PTR team leaders identify their experience as supporting people in becoming advocates for equity and taking action through leadership.

for community college leaders and practitioners (Shapiro et al., 2017). This is especially relevant in the state of Illinois where the unemployment rate for Black workers is the highest in the nation (McKinney, 2018). In order for community colleges to reach their goal as open access gateways, they must first ensure they are not gatekeepers to marginalized populations (Dowd, 2007).

Building on the work of Welton and La Londe (2013) that explored the influence of PTR participation on equity-conscious leadership, interviews were conducted with 14 team leaders that represented 11 different Illinois community colleges. When PTR was first implemented, the process was conducted over the course of a single academic year to engage stakeholders, analyze disaggregated data to identify equity gaps, explore related institutional processes and practices, and identify solutions for improvement and evaluation. The team leaders featured in this brief had participated in PTR over the course of two years. A second year of opportunity for PTR participation was instituted to provide support for change implementation and evaluation. These team leaders were positioned across varying roles within their community colleges including academic administration, Career and Technical Education (CTE) administration, and faculty.

Equality versus Equity

In terms of the impact of PTR participation on understanding and defining equity, evolution in thought processes are most pronounced at the individual and team levels. The team approach to participation was identified as providing ample opportunities for discussions centered on more clearly defining and understanding the meaning of equity. For one practitioner, this challenged previously held notions of equality:

“We kind of put those two terms together interchangeably, but in reality they’re not. Equality is—you’re talking about equal access. But equity, we’re talking about really leveling the playing field...especially given some of the challenges we’ve seen, not just in education but in society at large, we know that there’s still a lot of work to be done from an equitable standpoint for a lot of people in our country.”

As this experience indicates, personal and team definitions of equity in the context of PTR are frequently framed in access versus outcomes. Ching (2018) has identified the complexities of the change process toward practitioner understandings of “equity as equal outcomes” that is involved in shifting from being access-focused to outcomes-focused (p. 394). One practitioner described how their own understanding of equity shifted as it relates to supporting individual students to completion,

“I know, even as a college, we did a lot of work early on talking about equity being that everybody’s getting... what you do for one, you do for another. And I personally have moved a lot from that in the sense of not necessarily feeling like it means that everybody has to get exactly the same thing from me. They don’t all need the same thing from me.”

As these individuals and teams evolved in their understandings of equity, action followed. While this participant articulated having had a social justice mindset prior to PTR participation, they noted that the process provided an impetus to act on this within the scope of their role at the institution:

“...I see education as an equalizer. But I think that my understanding of how that might play out for different individuals has grown more over the last few years. Just thinking about the situation beyond gender, beyond race, looking at other factors that can contribute to that problem and also just be really deciding to become a much more vocal advocate for equity, trying to help as an [institutional] leader, trying to help those that work in [my division] understand that the small things that they do can create barriers, can create big barriers for people and just to be more mindful of their own biases, their own processes and practices that can create those barriers.”

Echoing the conclusions drawn by Welton and La Londe (2013), it is evident that PTR can be used as a tool to cultivate equity-mindedness for those directly engaged with the process. However, this is not without challenge as individuals and teams find themselves in conversations that can be difficult to navigate. However, it is precisely these conversations that are necessary and vital to advancing equity in community colleges across the nation (Dembicki, 2019). The importance of addressing historical inequities in our educational system has led the American Association of Community Colleges to launch the Unfinished Business initiative to support community colleges in closing persistent equity gaps (Pierce, 2019). Individuals that have served as PTR team leaders can be assets to their institutions as community colleges answer this call to lead the nation in closing equity gaps for historically marginalized populations.



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