

The Impact of Research and the Power of Data: Leveraging Data as a Scholar Practitioner to Drive Decision Making for Equity!

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I share ways in which my professional journey, from admissions and enrollment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, intersect with my evolution as a scholar-practitioner through CANDEL, the doctorate in educational leadership program at the University of California Davis. I further share how I have leveraged my experience in the EdD program as a scholar-practitioner to challenge systems of higher education through storytelling and counter narratives as a means to reroute narratives that institutions create around the experiences of marginalized communities, including the African diaspora.

KEYWORDS

Diversity, diverse student population, Educational Equity, Equity, Inclusion, practitioner-scholar, standardized tests, college admission, workforce development, CANDEL

MY CANDEL JOURNEY

I was first introduced to the term scholar-practitioner through CANDEL. At the time I was serving as Executive Director of Undergraduate Admissions and had years of practice and expertise acquired solely as a practitioner. Through CANDEL I was able to apply those skills through a research lens and develop practical experience with tools used by campus partners such as Enrollment Management. I evolved from being a requestor of data to a practitioner able to clean raw data, conduct a deep analysis, and clearly present findings. It was an empowering process that strengthened my leadership. Starting from my journey through CANDEL until now, I have more informed conversations with faculty, team members and campus partners. I also have a better grasp of what questions to ask when requesting data. In my current work, I am also able to guide our graduate student researchers with greater intentionality through the data analysis and writing process whether it is producing publications, white papers or reports. I am also able to see gaps in the data our team may be analyzing for a project, and provide insight to support the requested deliverables and more.

USING THEORY TO FRAME RESEARCH AND UNDERSTAND PRACTICE

Several key theories and concepts from my CANDEL coursework have influenced my thinking about my doctoral research. They have also helped me frame and understand professional experiences in admissions/enrollment and my current work in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) related to topics such as K-16 collaborations within higher education, Black student enrollment, and addressing anti-Blackness within University settings. These theories include College Choice Theory, Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Data Driven Decision Making (DDDM).

My research and much of the work that I have done over my twenty years in undergraduate admissions connects with College Choice Theory. Often viewed as the foundational model for College Choice Theory, Hossler and Gallagher (1987) described a three-phased process: pre-disposition, search, and choice. Pre-disposition, the first stage, is where students, even at a very young age, assess whether going to college is something they can envision for themselves, and can be influenced by factors such as socioeconomic status and experiencing educational success which serves as motivator for students. Community, family and parental support, perceptions and expectations also serve a role in influencing the student's interests and desires to pursue higher education. Following this is the search phase in which students establish a set of colleges they want to apply to, also known as a choice set, and proceed with obtaining further information. During this phase colleges and universities have the opportunity to more deeply engage with students as they explore their options and decide where to apply. In the final phase, choice, students decide where they will attend weighing out aspects they deem important including cost of attendance, financial aid and scholarships and other priorities.

From the view of an admission and enrollment practitioner, this theory allowed me to begin making the connections between research and practice by considering the alignment of college choice theory and the student admissions funnel, which is a way of mapping the student journey through the admissions and enrollment process. In a typical admissions funnel¹ students begin as prospects who

¹ Salesforce Enrollment Funnel Overview <https://www.salesforce.org/resources/article/breaking-down-the-admissions-funnel/>



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have not actively engaged with the University but are considering higher education (pre-disposition phase), and convert to inquiries who are now connecting directly with the University such as through newsletters, email campaigns, and campus visits (search phase). It is during this stage that colleges and universities are conducting recruitment and outreach efforts, engaging with students typically in high school and community college, but also engaging earlier through academic preparation and related programs to engage students earlier in their K-12 journey. Following this, students transition to applicants once they have applied for admissions (search phase), and once they've received their admissions offer, they are considered an accepted or admitted student and now must decide where to enroll (choice phase). Once an admitted student accepts their offer of admission, they transition to what some refer to as deposits having made a financial payment or deposit securing their spot (Salesforce, Inc., 2023). The final stage is enrolled. After matching up the phases of college choice with the admissions funnel, I was able to more clearly understand how college choice could be affecting enrollment outcomes, where gaps still appeared in understanding why certain students from the African diaspora were deciding not to accept their offer of admissions to the University of California Davis, and where this could be explained further through qualitative data.

The intersection between both property and race “creates an analytical tool through which we can understand social (and, consequently, school) inequity” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 48) given the longstanding history and tensions surrounding property in the U.S. The authors posit that U.S. struggles surrounding race and property include the establishment of people, Africans specifically, as property, the removal of indigenous communities from their land, and the prioritization of property over human rights (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). They further described how curriculum amounts to intellectual property, and similar to how property values vary so does the quantity and quality of educational curriculum which adversely impacts students of color given the history of race and racism in this country, its systems and institutions including schooling. While at its core, CRT is expansive beyond its educational application, one principle of CRT that resonated most with me as scholar-practitioner in education is the use of storytelling and counter narratives.

Parker and Lynn (2002) took a historical look at the evolution of CRT, arguing that it is needed in contemporary qualitative and educational research as a foundation to the ways in which previous educational research has or has not addressed concerns regarding racism and race. The authors stressed the key role that storytelling and narrative play to explain how the past directly influences the present power dynamics and hierarchical structures that perpetuate and protect white privilege. Through narrative, CRT uncovers and further explores race and racial oppression and the key role both played in the construction of our legal system, a premise that the authors argue was left out of discussions surrounding Critical Legal Studies (CLS). As race and racism are continually shaped by politics and political pressure and, given that they are socio-political constructs, context and perspective that comes from storytelling should be relied upon to more accurately explore experiences (Parker & Lynn, 2002). It is from this lens that I view my own research and practice.

In my 2021 study, one primary objective was to help “the University successfully achieve their goal of supporting greater diversity and representation of students from historically underrepresented minority communities and marginalized

backgrounds, including African American students” (Lewis, 2021, p. 179) by understanding why Black admitted freshmen decided not to attend UC Davis. Building from a 2015 systemwide study that looked at Black student college choice, diversity and exclusion (Contreras et al., 2015) at a macro level throughout the University of California, my mixed-methods study allowed me to analyze existing institutional data, and also apply CRT principles of counter storytelling in education by utilizing qualitative data via student interviews, as a means to gain greater insight into what matters to our Black scholars and how we can learn from their experiences to create a more inclusive environment.

As a scholar-practitioner I have been able to utilize storytelling and counter narratives to amplify the voices of and challenge systems to improve the experiences of marginalized communities. One way I am actively doing this is through my work in the DEI Division at UC Davis as lead of The IDEA initiative, formerly the Institute for Diversity, Equity and Advancement². The IDEA serves as a nexus for DEI-focused scholarship and practice, centralizing “partnerships and projects that involve DEI recruitment, retention, and advancement programs that reduce barriers to and expand access to excellence in educational achievement,” (UC Davis DEI, 2023) disseminating findings and supporting opportunities for students, faculty and staff to thrive. Through this initiative I have had the opportunity to launch DEI’s eScholarship page, an open access site for publications, co-publish several white papers including COVID Diaries³, a study published in 2022 and conducted in partnership with The IDEA, Sacramento Area Youth Speaks, and UCD’s Chicano/a Studies Department focused on providing youth (primarily from historically marginalized communities) in the Sacramento region a platform to voice the ways in which COVID has impacted their learning such as fear of becoming ill or losing loved ones, administrative challenges transitioning students back to an in-person learning environment, and the digital divide that exposed significant equity gaps in learning due to socioeconomic barriers regarding access to Wi-Fi and technology. The purpose of sharing these student voices is to influence policy and practice changes that root out, address, minimize and/or eliminate inequities.

Most notably, I have also served as lead for The IDEA’s Aggie Black Excellence project, which focuses on addressing anti-blackness at UC Davis and is framed around the five pedagogical stances (5PS) developed by Dr. Maisha Winn and Dr. Lawrence T. Winn which underscore ways in which history, race, justice, language, and futures matter (2021). The 5PS was introduced to me when I joined the DEI Division in 2021 and provides a foundation for educators to engage in equity work and restorative justice. Focusing on the first two stances, history and race, the 5PS posits that understanding and acknowledging history/ies is foundational given “racial discrimination and associated opportunity gaps are ever-evolving manifestations of America’s devastating history of racial terror” (Winn, 2021, p. 7). This framework also challenges educators

² The IDEA <https://diversity.ucdavis.edu/idea>

³ COVID Diaries White Paper <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2665c4bx#page=33>



to explore the ways in which history has both shaped them and influenced working relations, while also exploring the ways in which their organizations, institutions and communities have evolved and been impacted and shaped by historical changes as well as changes that may have occurred in the workplace (Winn, 2021). The second stance, race matters, acknowledges histories of racial terror and exclusion with particular focus on the impacts and implications of the enslavement of Africans throughout the world (Winn, 2021) and underscores the necessity for educators to “examine how racist ideas are implicit and/or embodied, causing harm that can include exclusion, marginalization, and/or oppressive self-doubt that makes it nearly impossible for oppressed individuals and groups to explore multiple versions of themselves” (Winn, 2021, pg. 11) while also inviting the practitioner to explore how race shows up in their organizations, institutions and communities.

Using the 5PS as a framework, I led The IDEA’s launch of a series of community listening sessions with staff, students (undergraduate and graduate), faculty and alumni to better understand how anti-Blackness was showing up for them at UC Davis. Between March and June 2022, we held seven community listening sessions, which also served as a means of counter storytelling, with nearly 199 participants who responded to the following questions:

1. In what ways has anti-Blackness impeded your ability to advance in your educational or career pursuits?
2. What existing practices and innovations have helped you or those you know to achieve excellence?
3. What research or actions do you think are effective or would you like to see to enhance the recruitment, retention, and advancement of Black students, staff, and faculty at UC Davis? (Lewis et al., 2023, p. 1)

In September 2023, The IDEA published a white paper outlining the key findings which are categorized into four overarching themes: 1. Communication, Information and Accountability 2. Community, Climate and Sense of Belonging 3. Recruitment, Retention and Advancement and 4. Uplifting Black Culture and Visibility (Lewis et al., 2023). Each theme included a series of sub-themes aligned with participant feedback from staff, faculty, undergraduate students, graduate students, and alumni. Additionally, the report outlines opportunities for action that would allow for institutional accountability and transparency to continue what is working, amplify and celebrate the voices and accomplishments across the African diaspora at UC Davis, and move the needle through strategic and collective cross-campus collaboration to address critical areas identified that impede the advancement of Black students, faculty, and staff. Furthermore, the white paper outlines efforts that were previously done, in progress or in place between the time when listening sessions were held and findings were published. Since concluding the listening sessions, I have had the privilege of leveraging these community narratives in conjunction with other campus data (including results from my doctoral study along with campus employee satisfaction survey results) to operationalize several of the suggested actions to support the overall diaspora. This included launching and enhancing

the Aggie Black Excellence Website⁴ to “serve as an online ‘information hub’ and a one-stop shop/landing page for all things Black at UC Davis.” (Lewis et al., 2021, p.48) We also recently established The Aggie Black Excellence Collective “aimed at prioritizing strategies and recommending specific action plans to improve the experience of students, staff, and faculty of the African diaspora at UC Davis” (Lewis et al., 2021, p. 49). This Collective is aligned with the recommendation in my doctoral study for UC Davis to establish a “formal campus-wide Black/African Diaspora initiative overseen by a corresponding taskforce, similar to the current HSI taskforce, for investigating Black student representation and experiences at UCD from enrollment through matriculation” (Lewis, 2021, p. 167) to support institutional accountability. Additionally, this Collective is being structured to include staff, students, alumni, campus leaders, representatives from diversity committees and employee resource groups and other community members as appropriate.

As a tool to help strategize priorities and interventions, I intend to utilize a theory known as Data Driven Decision Making (DDDM). Offered as we neared the end of our core curriculum in CANDEL, the DDDM course provided the greatest opportunity for practical application of theory and research. While there are slightly varying definitions, “DDDM in education typically refers to teachers, principals, and administrators systematically collecting and analyzing data to guide a range of decisions to help improve the success of students and schools” (Ikemoto and Marsh, 2007, p. 107). One of my greatest takeaways from this course was the process we went through to generate a DDDM plan to address a problem or question we were currently facing in our work. To address the problem through data, our plan needed to include input, context, process, output and satisfaction data. As part of this process, we were charged with identifying aspects within the organizational culture that could promote or inhibit our ability to effectively implementing DDDM, including organizational culture such as leadership and routines, and identify ways to leverage factors that would support the process and mitigate risks that could derail our DDDM plan. Additionally, paired in groups of three to four, we served as consultants, reviewing and analyzing other group members’ DDDM plans, where we determined how well they aligned with DDDM principles and offered recommendations that could strengthen their plans and strategies. Most of the curriculum in CANDEL focused on understanding theory and developing as researchers. However, as a practitioner it is just as important to make use of research and data in pragmatic ways that affect long-term sustainable change. DDDM provides a conceptual framework by which to do so.

Through our Aggie Black Excellence project, one problem that I intend to address utilizing DDDM, in collaboration with other campus partners, is low employee satisfaction among Black staff and Black women in particular. In a 2021 UC systemwide Staff Engagement Survey developed in partnership with UC’s systemwide Employee Relations team and the Council of UC Staff Assemblies (CUCSA),

⁴ Aggie Black Excellence site <https://diversity.ucdavis.edu/aggie-black-excellence>



results for UC Davis revealed that Black/African American employees rated the lowest among all employees who reported an ethnicity, in the areas of Career Development, Diversity & Inclusion and Empowered Culture. These statistically significant results were much lower than those of non-Black employees. Similar findings were identified in the most recent 2022 Staff Experience Survey administered by UC Davis to its employees. While Black staff only reflected 6%-8% of all academic and non-academic staff between the Davis and Health campuses in 2023 (UC Davis Institutional Analysis, 2023), Black staff rated low on employee satisfaction. In particular, Black women rated exceptionally lower than other demographic groups on many of the significant survey questions in the 2022 UC Davis Staff Experience Survey (UC Davis DEI, 2024). This quantitative data aligns with some of the narrative data Black women staff shared during the listening sessions in which several recalled their direct experiences:

“As a Black woman, I feel like I get more grief. People question if I know what I am talking about [saying] ‘are you sure you’re right?’”

“When calling things out as nicely as possible, you get marked as a disruptive, angry Black woman. [I’ve] been seen as wanting to disrupt the status quo.” (Lewis et al., 2022, p. 14)

CANDEL has influenced me as a scholar-practitioner to utilize equity centered research to shift the educational landscape. My doctoral research and dissertation have served as catalysts for me to reach educators and leaders not only at my institution but nationally. Often, practitioners are so consumed with getting the work done that they do not have the bandwidth to share the impact of their work in a scholarly manner. Yet, connecting research and practice is a critical part of the higher educational landscape and from my vantage point, scholar practitioners are uniquely positioned to leverage findings from our research to validate what we as practitioners often know but may lack the empirical data to support in a manner that is compelling to leaders at the highest levels of an organization including those who determine budget allocations, staffing and other resources. It also presents an opportunity to further partner with faculty, Colleges, Divisions and other collaborators who are internal and external to the University to support equity, access and inclusion.

CLOSING THOUGHTS AND A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT

Writing this manuscript has brought me full circle from almost seven years ago to the date I submitted my application to the CANDEL program. In many ways this process has served as a refresher regarding the ways in which I have evolved from a student to a scholar-practitioner. Also, in a climate where Black women who occupy leadership roles in higher education are feeling attacked, where our wellness is not being prioritized, where Black women leaders are being pressured to step down from their positions and/or are tragically passing away; this process was somewhat validating. Aligned with the 5PS, that history, race, justice, language and futures matter (Winn & Winn, 2021) this process has re-affirmed that I/we matter, that our voices matter, that our wellness matters and should be prioritized, that we belong, and that we are making a difference. Many of the theories and concepts introduced through CANDEL are applicable to my current work as a DEI practitioner, which reaffirms my choice to participate in CANDEL and obtain the EdD.

Upon reflection, my journey to becoming a scholar-practitioner began well before I applied to the CANDEL program. Among the experiences that have shaped my educational leadership is one pivotal moment when I realized I have a voice that matters and can help drive change came during my senior year in high school. I attended a public high school and followed the tracking system, in which some students were tracked into lower-level class, and others were tracked into college prep courses including honors and Advanced Placement (AP) classes. While I happened to be part of the latter group, many peers that looked like me, and came from the same or similar communities as I did, were tracked into lower-level courses. My AP English instructor saw the negative impact this was having on students and communities, and while not from the ethnic/cultural community that I identified with, she was an advocate. She invited me to speak during what I would later learn was the public comment portion of a UC Board Regents meeting. For context, as described in section 21.1 of its bylaws, the Board consists of governor appointed Regents who serve “as trustees for the people of the State of California and as stewards for the University of California, acting to govern the University as a public trust in fulfillment of its educational, research, and public service missions in the best interests of the people of California” (University of California, 2020). The key role of the Board is to set policy which the University’s administration is then responsible for implementing. As I prepared to present, I was very nervous and hesitant, but with my English teacher’s encouragement and the support of my parents I took on the challenge to speak about the importance of de-tracking in schools. Little did I know that this would lay the foundation for the work that I am doing now. This experience of sharing my own counter narrative was an awakening for me. This was the moment that my leadership began to transform, and an example of my commitment to equity which led me on the journey to become a scholar practitioner. I had already been senior class president, and led the Black Student Union, but the connection through these efforts was educational access and equity and much of it related to socioeconomics.

While walking in my purpose, I often did not know the next destination until I was there. I certainly did not set out to have a 20 year plus career in admission and enrollment, and while I have been involved in diversity and equity work most of my life, the term DEI was not yet something I was familiar with all those years ago. However, I can now look back and see the path that led me to this point. I count it an honor and a privilege to do this work, to serve as a leader, a scholar-practitioner, and to continue promoting access and equity. To those currently on their journey as a doctoral student and a scholar-practitioner, I want to encourage you to keep walking in your purpose and lean into your gifts. You may be stretched beyond your comfort zone at times (that was quantitative research methods for me) but embrace the discomfort and keep pressing forward. Stay committed during this season of transformation and know that you are already making a difference!

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