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Contextual Problem Defining

Learning to Think and Act

PERSPECTIVES

Students felt misled by campus recruiting strategies that painted a picture of a diverse campus

ONE OF THE MOST CRITICAL CHALLENGES facing institutions of higher education in the twenty-first century is the need to be more accountable for producing equitable educational outcomes for students of color. Although access to higher education has increased significantly over the past two decades, it has not translated into equitable educational outcomes. Not only do

African Americans, Hispanics, and Native

Americans have lower graduation rates than whites and Asian Americans, they also experience inequalities in just about every indicator of academic success—from earned grade point average to placement on the dean's list to graduation rates in competitive majors. The incidence of unequal educational outcomes for minority students is not always visible, however; the disaggregation of data on educational outcomes is not a routine practice at the great majority of colleges and universities.

Since 2001, researchers at the Center for Urban Education have been working with colleges and universities in California, and more recently in Colorado, Washington, and Wisconsin, in the development and pilot-testing of Equity for All, an institutional change intervention designed to close the equity gap in higher education. Among the aims of Equity

for All are (1) to increase campus members' awareness of differences in educational outcomes across racial and ethnic groups, and (2) to encourage "equity-mindedness" in the ways campus members make sense of unequal educational outcomes and the role they play in eliminating them.

As we use it, the concept of equity-mindedness is distinct from prevailing ways of conceptualizing issues related to the participation of minority students in higher education, specifically deficit thinking and diversity thinking. From a deficit standpoint, unequal outcomes are attributed to the personal characteristics of the students who experience them. From a diversity standpoint, the dominant concerns are inclusiveness, intercultural communication, and cross-race relationships.

By contrast, the equity standpoint regards the educational status of historically underrepresented students in all types of institutions, not just those that are predominantly white and elite, as representing the greatest challenge facing higher education practitioners. The critical distinction between equity and deficit thinking is in how the problem of inequality in educational outcomes is framed. In deficit thinking, the unit of analysis and intervention is focused on the students, who are viewed as having a learning deficiency that can be addressed with new teaching techniques, supplementary programs, and add-on academic support systems to compensate for the deficiency. In equity thinking, the points of focus are the practitioner—administrators and faculty alike—and the institution. Thus, from an equity standpoint, practitioners themselves are viewed as the solution to students' learning problems.

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from the Standpoint of Equity



Individual transformation through inquiry

Through the execution of their everyday roles as teachers, advisers, counselors, and managers, campus members have the potential to impact, positively or negatively, the educational outcomes of minority group students. The impact of an individual is mediated by his or her awareness of racial patterns in educational outcomes and by the ways he or she makes sense of these patterns. The realization of this potential depends, first, on the extent of individuals' awareness of race-based inequalities within their own context, and second, on their having the knowledge and experience to make sense of them from the standpoint of equity, rather than deficit.

Sociocultural theories suggest that individuals learn and change as a consequence of collaborative engagement in productive activity. Organizational theories suggest that there are different types of learning and that not all learning results in transformative change. In fact, they suggest that most learning within organizations consists of single-loop learning, whereas change—whether at the individual or the institutional level—requires double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön 1996). The difference between single- and double-loop learning is that the former encourages individuals to view a problem functionally and search for structural or programmatic solutions. In contrast, double-loop learning entails the ability to reflect on a problem from within, in relation to one's own values, beliefs, and practices. Simply put, the difference is that the single-loop learner locates the problem externally and seeks to change others. Conversely, the double-loop learner is more apt to start from the self and engage in reflection that brings about self-change in values, beliefs, and practices.

Learning and self-change are enabled through the engagement of practitioners as researchers in a collaborative activity to define and contextualize the particularities of a problem as it exists within their own milieu. Equity for All consists of phases where the learning activities are progressively more complex and intense. During the first phase, "data-based awareness," practitioners construct an "equity scorecard" (see Bensimon 2004). In the second phase, "contextualized problem defining," practitioners interview African American and Latino students as a

strategy to learn about and reflect on how these students experience academic and social life on campus.

Racial and ethnic inequalities in educational outcomes are present, although not always visible or acknowledged, in research universities, selective liberal arts colleges, Hispanic-serving institutions, urban community colleges, and predominantly minority institutions; yet the details of these inequalities are distinctive. Variations across institutions necessitate that practitioners develop local knowledge. We developed contextualized problem defining as an alternative to the compensatory programmatic interventions commonly put in place once campus members become aware of inequalities in educational outcomes.

Defining the problem

Contextualized problem defining entails teams of faculty members and administrators working collaboratively as researchers on the problem of unequal outcomes. The composition of the teams depends on the kind of inquiry undertaken. The members of the teams, with our assistance as facilitators, design and conduct the inquiry project, thus creating locally meaningful knowledge. By becoming involved as researchers in a collaborative inquiry, the participants develop deeper knowledge about the problem; they may also come to problematize their assumptions about the nature of the problem as well as their attitudes, beliefs, and practices vis-à-vis minority student groups. Thus, contextualized problem defining represents both a method of gathering and analyzing data as well as an intervention aimed at developing equity thinking among faculty members and other critical institutional actors.

Contextualized problem defining consists of three elements: situated inquiry, practitioner-as-researcher, and community of practice.

Situated Inquiry. A faculty member can become an expert about an individual student through purposeful inquiry into the student's educational history and by reflecting on the correspondence between the student's situation and the assumptions underlying the faculty member's practices. Rather than accepting inequities in educational outcomes as inevitable, the professional begins to consider how to adapt his or her methods of teaching or advising to align them with the students' ways of learning. Becoming an expert on the educational



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history of one or more students can empower a practitioner to become a change agent.

Practitioner-as-researcher. The purpose of inquiry is to bring about change at individual, organizational, and societal levels. Guided by outside facilitators, teams of faculty members collect data and create knowledge about local problems. Above all, it is important for the insiders to assume ownership of their findings. The outcome is knowledge that heightens the members' awareness of what is occurring within their own institutions and increases their motivation to effect change. Thus, the knowledge produced in this model is practical and effective in directing changes. Participating in an inquiry group can increase members' awareness of a problem, make them more conscious of their capacities for action, and empower them to use their newly acquired expertise to influence others (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, and Vallejo 2004).

Community of practice. The kind of learning we wish to promote—e.g., learning that inequities exist, learning how students experience their own learning within the academic and social context of a particular campus, learning how to experiment with new ways of teaching or advising—is more likely to happen in conversation with others. However, participation in a community of practice is not simply a matter of attending meetings or events. A fundamental condition for situated learning is social interaction through collaboration. The group of faculty, as practitioner-researchers, forms a community of practice (Wenger 1998)—practitioners who organize around some form of knowledge and develop shared commitment, responsibility, and identity with regard to this knowledge. Learning happens through shared social interactions and dialogic conversations within the community of practice.

An example

The following example is based on our experience with a four-year college that collaborated with us in developing the methods and activities that comprise the contextualized problem-defining approach. The inquiry team was formed in response to a review of numerical data that revealed noticeable differences in the educational outcomes of African Americans and Latinos. As a result of the team's data-based awareness, team members



realized that they needed to develop a deeper understanding of the factors contributing to these outcomes. The team agreed that interviews would be the most appropriate method for learning how students view their experiences on campus, including their beliefs and attitudes about the institution and about themselves as learners. While this campus chose student interviews as the method of contextualized problem defining, other inquiry approaches are possible.

The team of faculty interviewers agreed that each member would interview two to three African American or Latino students three times over their freshman and sophomore years. Interviewing the students more than once allowed faculty to gain trust and to follow the students across their first two years of college.



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In order to prepare for the interviews, team members participated in a one-day training provided by Equity for All researchers. Many of the team members were not formally trained in interview techniques; the training session provided opportunities to discuss the process and mechanics. The interview team worked together to develop the interview protocol, focusing the questions on defining more specifically the inequalities in educational outcomes that were reported in the equity scorecard the campus team created.

The team met before and after each round of interviews. These research meetings provided a space where faculty members could discuss the themes and interesting findings that emerged from their interviews. The discussions were important in developing the

protocol for subsequent interviews, and they were important as opportunities to discuss the experience of meeting and interviewing a student, the difficulties of asking race-related questions—particularly when the team member and the student were not from the same racial group—and the often surprising ways students were interpreting their environment.

Faculty experiences

One of the principles of contextual problem defining is that faculty members, through situated learning, have to think critically about the situation of students of color in order to assume greater accountability for equitable educational outcomes. Toward this end, our objectives were for the faculty participants to understand the cultural and structural barriers

students of color face in gaining equal academic outcomes; to engage in critical thinking about the social, political, and structural forces that affect students' experiences; and to become empowered to address unequal outcomes.

To evaluate our progress in achieving these objectives, over the course of eighteen months, we interviewed and observed four white faculty members who participated on this team from its inception. Based on our evaluation, we provide glimpses of faculty members' experiences in contextualized problem defining to illustrate the potential of this approach as a means of fostering learning and change that reflect the emergence of equity thinking and doing. The excerpts provided below are taken from interviews conducted with each participating faculty member after each round of student interviews. In some cases, we also provide excerpts from conversations that took place during the research meetings of the inquiry group.

Barbara

After hearing stories about professors who shut out minority students or who "hadn't created a space that made [alternative] viewpoints welcome" in the classroom, Barbara, a professor of biology, began to think about how she approached students in her own classroom. She confessed that she often connected with students who think or behave as she does, and sometimes dismissed those who do not. "What it made me think about," Barbara reflected, "is that I need to make sure that I leave a space open in the classroom for people that may not think the same way that I think." She concluded that she needed to give more attention and feedback to students of color in her classes, especially early in the semester before they fell through the academic cracks.

One of the students Barbara interviewed had participated in the campus multicultural summer program and reported making strong connections to peers in the summer cohort. The student "needed to have this group of like-minded, like-experienced students that she felt she could rely on." This reliance on the students' peers lasted throughout the first year. This student's story made Barbara "think how important that sort of pre-college experience can be to some of our students." The following summer, Barbara decided to teach in the multicultural summer program.

Grace

Grace, another biology professor, felt that the way the student interviews "affected [her] behavior most was as an adviser." While some students relied on advisers for signatures alone, others "sat down with them and talked about all kinds of things." Grace realized that "personal involvement is a big component in how [the interviewees] feel about school, how they feel about themselves." Based on her student interviews, Grace identified work-study and financial aid as issues that are particularly critical to success, and she responded by discussing financial matters with her own advisees. For example, with an African American student, she made a concerted effort to broach topics pertaining to summer employment or internship opportunities. "I'm trying to keep on top of his work-study commitment, and I never would have thought of that before."

For Grace, one of the most poignant lessons came from an interview with a Latina whose first language was not English. "I found out how she has struggled to find her place and her voice in this community. I have learned how she struggles with participation in class with the added burden of thinking about how she will be perceived every time she opens her mouth."

The interview process also helped Grace to problematize the notion of diversity. Her research team found that students felt misled by campus recruiting strategies that painted a picture of a diverse campus. "It's a calling card and a money maker to call itself diverse," Grace reflected. "Maybe this is backfiring in a way. Maybe [students] feel a burden about carrying this banner, but it's not as diverse as its banner said. Maybe we need to work more at the substance and a little bit less on the window dressing."

Jack

An English professor who has held a variety of leadership roles on campus, Jack also found himself thinking about the interview process in relation to student advisement. He felt he had learned things about students that could, in turn, help him to become a more effective adviser. "I probably am in a position to help [the interviewees] more than I am with the students who actually come to me for advice under the structures of the college's advising program," he said. "I should probably just spend more time talking, one-on-one, with my students, period."

In speaking about “Anglo, mainstream, upper-middle-class, mainly male faculty” like himself, Jack said,

I think we need, first of all, to be honest and to recognize that racial, ethnic, economic differences really are very significant. That they’re not matters of indifference to our students. That your color, your family background, your economic background, your cultural background, have tremendous consequences for who you are in the classroom, and for those things that the professor sees. And I think, because there’s a lot of work involved in acknowledging that, or in doing something about it once you’ve acknowledged it, I think that we often want to shy away from it.

Just to acknowledge these issues is particularly difficult for white faculty, Jack realized, especially those who want to believe that discrimination is not a problem in higher education.

Matt

During the summer break following the first year of interviews, Matt, a mathematics professor, decided to send an e-mail to the students he had interviewed during their freshman year. In response, he received “an e-mail from the woman who was totally disconnected when I first interviewed her. . . . She said, ‘It makes me feel so good to hear from you since not that many people write me and it makes me happy to know a faculty member thinks about me and my summer.’” Matt reported that the interviews helped him make a personal connection with a student who was vulnerable to dropping out. “It is one thing that is going to keep the student here, make them successful and feel that they belong here.”

At the end of the project, Matt reflected on his experience interviewing students:

This project has been invaluable to me as I weave the personal stories of three of our students of color, their perceptions of the institution, with my perceptions of the institution, our policies, and our structures. It helps me gain a deeper sense of difficult questions about equity that must be asked and must be addressed. It helps me think about how I bring my own experiences and, yes, prejudices to the shaping of my teaching and the other work I do in this institution, and how this may or may not resonate with all of our students.



Winthrop University

Conclusion

None of the excerpts provided above reveals evidence of a major breakthrough in thinking. In fact, one could easily dismiss the insights gained by these faculty members as elementary knowledge that should be familiar to anyone who has read the literature on the importance of student-faculty relationships, stereotype threat, or white privilege. These excerpts are significant, however, insofar as they demonstrate how much more powerful learning can be when individuals construct their own knowledge about these concepts within their own context. As they become aware of specific cultural and structural experiences that impede student success within their own campus, faculty members attain a clearer responsiveness about the issues that need to be tackled.

The individuals involved in this project have the motivation to face a problem that others may not see or, if they do, may accept as inevitable. Through the interviews, they are learning what they do not know about minority students; they are learning to question their assumptions; and they are learning to problematize diversity. Thus, the most promising outcome of contextualized problem defining is the potential to inspire agency that is grounded in critical reflection and that prompts individuals to bring about change from the inside. □

To respond to this article, e-mail liberaled@aacu.org, with the authors’ names on the subject line.

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