

Accountability for Equitable Outcomes in Higher Education

Estela Mara Bensimon
Professor and Co-Director
Center for Urban Education

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**Center for Urban Education
Rossier School of Education
University of Southern California**

Website: www.usc.edu/cue

E-mail: rsoecue@usc.edu

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Increasing the number and proportion of underrepresented and immigrant students who go to college, earn a degree, and earn the credentials to pursue graduate education and careers in science and technology is an unresolved challenge. Not for lack of trying. Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the establishment of affirmative action policies, there have been thousands of federal, state, and institutional initiatives to increase access and success for underrepresented students. Yet African Americans, Latinas and Latinos, and American Indians—to name the groups doing least well and with the highest number of risk factors associated with low educational attainment—continue to fall below parity on basic indicators of success.

Despite numerous diversity initiatives most higher education systems have not met their aspirations for equitable outcomes. Higher education has been least successful in closing the gaps for African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students. Data at the national, state, and campus levels show that these students have the lowest rate of bachelor's degree attainment; if they start their education at a community college their chances of transferring to a four-year comprehensive college is less than 10 out of a 100, and their chances of transferring to a selective flagship campus can be as low as 5 out of a 1000. The great majority¹ of these students, unlike president-elect Obama, are far less likely to have access to elite colleges, selective programs (e.g., honors programs, internships in prestigious organizations), and majors leading to positions in high demand fields (e.g., engineering, computer science).

Inequality in higher education participation is an urgent problem. It will reduce the proportion of college educated adults, which in turn will have detrimental effects on states' economies, workforce preparation, the quality of life of aging baby-boomers, and our aspirations to be a better integrated society. Even though most states are not experiencing demographic changes as dramatic as those taking place in the US-Mexico border states, Hispanics and other poorly educated immigrant groups are growing in large numbers across the country. As an example of this trend, in just ten years Wisconsin's Hispanic population grew by more than 100%.

Reducing racial inequality in higher education participation and outcomes is in the public's self-interest. Oddly, most accountability systems lack robust indicators to assess equity in educational outcomes by race and ethnicity. Over the last several years, numerous reports, articles, and books have warned that the persistence of inequality will depress the economy and increase social polarization. Despite the warnings, most higher education systems do not monitor outcomes by race and ethnicity or have specific goals for improvement based on their population.

¹ Center for Urban Education, unpublished calculations for selected states by community college and race and ethnicity.

The policy challenge is to gain support for the incorporation of equity into accountability systems, assessments of educational quality, and evaluation processes. Policymakers and institutional leaders may be reluctant to adopt specific indicators of equity and set equity goals because they may seem incongruous with the ideals of color-blindness and equal treatment. Alternatively, the act of setting goals for equity in educational outcomes by race and ethnicity could be viewed as laying the groundwork for a color-blind society. We can point to No Child Left Behind, which requires school districts to report data by race and ethnicity and establish improvement goals, as a precedent for the legitimacy of incorporating equity into accountability and assessment systems.

Recommendation: State policymakers, higher education governance bodies, and institutional leaders should establish accountability practices for routine data collection, use, and reporting to continually monitor the status of educational opportunity and outcomes by racial-ethnic group.

As a first step, policymakers and institutional leaders should audit their standard operating practices for accountability and assessment to determine what information is already being provided by race and ethnicity; what information is not provided by race and ethnicity; and what additional information should be provided by race and ethnicity. Indicators (see Appendix A for sample of selected indicators) should make it possible for policymakers to answer basic questions such as:

Does the distribution of first-time students show overrepresentation/underrepresentation by institutional type and selectivity for any racial-ethnic group? Is the proportion of high school applicants equal to their proportion in the graduation class? Is the racial-ethnic composition of the pool of students who transfer from two- to four-year colleges comparable to their proportion of the community college population? Do outcomes for the current year show improvements over previous years? Is the trend line for equity in educational outcomes going up, down, or staying flat?

Policymakers should establish a definition of equity (see Appendix B for definitions) and measure(s) so that there is a standard criterion to identify gaps and determine improvement targets by race and ethnicity. Having a target for improvement enables policymakers, the public, advocacy groups, and institutional leaders to be cognizant of and continuously monitor what outcomes and for which groups are over, below, or on target. Measurable goals make intended outcomes more visible and concrete, and policy makers as well as institutional leaders can be more intentional about where to focus attention and resources.

Policymakers should insist on the disaggregation of data by race and ethnicity as a routine practice for all data reports. The practice of combining all racial and ethnic groups into a single category, e.g., “students of color” or “underrepresented minorities” should be discouraged because changes in outcomes are not evenly distributed.

Recommendation: Policymakers and funders should allocate resources to develop systemic and institutional capacity to transform accountability from a system of data reporting into a system for organizational learning and change.

Accountability systems are designed to produce information on the performance of public higher education. The underlying presumption is that if decision-makers are better informed, they are more likely to make decisions that will achieve expected outcomes. The theory of action of most accountability systems, although not explicitly stated, is that data drive change². This assumption can be found in the Spellings Commission Report³ which asserts repeatedly the importance of data, the inadequacy of data systems, the shortage of clear and accessible information, etc. The contention is that more and better data will result in improved decisions by policymakers, institutions, and the public. But data alone will not make equity or any other change happen. Accountability data are like a thermometer, they show the “temperature.” But just as a thermometer cannot change the temperature, data are not self-acting.⁴

Proponents of evidence-based decision-making seriously underestimate the complexity of transforming data into actionable knowledge to improve institutional performance and effectiveness. The conversion of data into useful information requires mediating structures, processes, and sense-making practices. Otherwise, practitioners will have a difficult time in seeing the relationship of data to their everyday practices. The reality is that practitioners, those at the ground level who are in the best positions to bring about change in practices, rarely get to engage with data in substantive ways. Campus leaders, institutional researchers, and policy analysts often lack the theoretical knowledge, practical experience, and tools that are needed to foster organizational learning about how to improve equity. In the long run, professional development that teaches campus leaders how to use inquiry skills to bring about change may be a wiser and less costly investment than investing in building bigger and more powerful data bases and systems to produce data of limited use.

Recommendation: A research agenda to produce knowledge that will improve institutional capacity to create equitable outcomes should address two undertheorized and understudied areas:

- The ways in which practitioners’ knowledge, beliefs, experiences, education, and sense of self-efficacy shape the college experience of African American, Hispanic, and American Indian students, and

² Dowd, A. C. (2005). *Data don't drive: Building a practitioner-driven culture of inquiry to assess community college performance* (Research Report). Indianapolis, IN: Lumina Foundation for Education.

³U.S. Department of Education. (2006). *A test of leadership: Charting the future of U.S. higher education*. Washington, D.C

⁴ Cohen, D. K., Raudenbush, S. W., & Ball, D. L. (2003). Resources, instruction, and research. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 25(2), 119-142.

- How remedial or precollegiate instruction can be provided more effectively and efficiently.

Appendix A

<i>Access Indicators</i>	Sample indicators to report by race and ethnicity
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distribution of first-time college students by institutional type (2/4 yr) and institutional selectivity (flagship/comprehensive). • Number and percentage of high school graduates who apply, accepted/rejected, and enroll.
<i>Outcome Indicators</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number and percentage of first-time students who start in a two-year college and transfer to a four-year college within three years. • Number and percentage of first-time students who start in a four-year college and graduate within six years. • Number and percentage of students who were placed in remedial education courses and successfully transitioned to college level courses.
<i>Opportunity Indicators</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number and percentage of community college successfully transferring to flagship university. • Number and percentage of community college students who apply but are not admitted as transfers by flagship university • Number and percentage of students in honors programs

Appendix B

Useful Definitions of Equity

- **Representational Equity:** proportional participation of historically underrepresented racial-ethnic groups at all levels of an institution, including high status special programs, high-demand majors, and in the distribution of grades.
- **Resource Equity:** Educational resources, when unequally distributed, are directed at closing equity gaps.
- **Equity-Mindedness:** Individuals at various levels of an institution, including leaders and staff members, say and do things that reflect an awareness of equity issues and a willingness to address them. Equity perspectives are evident in actions, language, problem-framing, problem-solving, and cultural practices. This includes being “color conscious,” noticing differences in experience among racial-ethnic groups, and being willing to talk about race and ethnicity as an aspect of equity.

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