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The Equity Scorecard: A Collaborative Approach to Assess and Respond to Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Student Outcomes

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The Equity Scorecard, a nationally recognized and widely used organizational learning process designed to foster institutional change through the identification and elimination of racial disparities among college students, is described in this chapter. The effectiveness of this process and its potential impact are also discussed.

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Despite recent efforts to increase accountability in higher education, racial/ethnic disparities in student outcomes are a reality at most of the nation's colleges and universities (Bensimon, 2004). Disparate completion rates and a host of inequitable outcomes between racial/ethnic minorities and White students persist. Although most states have accountability systems, equity has not been incorporated as an indicator of institutional accountability or as an aspirational benchmark. Moreover, while many institutions monitor minute changes in the average SAT scores of entering first-year students obsessively, they do not keep track of how effectively they are performing based on the production of successful outcomes for minority students (Bensimon, Hao, and Bustillos, 2006). Neither external accountability systems nor internal institutional reports incorporate measures that would enable policymakers or institutional leaders to answer questions such as, "What proportion of African American students who earned bachelor degrees in 2007 had a cumulative grade point average of 3.5 or higher?" or "What proportion of a community college's Latina/o students are in the honors program that guarantees transfer to selective four-year colleges?"

Also, little attention is paid to how institutions can be more proactive in increasing the number of African American and Latina/o students who

graduate from college with high grade point averages (Gándara, 1999). By all indications, what institutions seem to pay attention to is whether they are admitting sufficient numbers of minority students and whether, once admitted, those students survive academically. The need for intentional monitoring of minority students' educational outcomes is made clear by Massey, Charles, Lundy, and Fisher (2003), whose analysis led them to conclude that "despite a variety of retention efforts . . . once admitted to institutions of higher education, African Americans and Latinos/as continually underperform relative to their White and Asian counterparts, earning lower grades, progressing at a slower pace, and dropping out at higher rates" (p. 2).

We assert that leaders in higher education pay attention to what is measured (Bensimon, 2004; Birnbaum, 1988), so it follows that if the academic outcomes of minority students are not assessed regularly and treated as measurable evidence of institutional performance, we can expect inequalities in outcomes to remain structurally hidden and unattended to. We believe that collecting data on student outcomes disaggregated by race and reporting on them regularly should be a standard operating practice in colleges and universities. At the same time, we also recognize that the value of student outcome data depends on the capacity and willpower of institutions to transform data into actionable knowledge. As Dowd (2005) points out, data provide information but in and of themselves do not drive change. People make change happen. Data are necessary for organizational learning (Argyris and Schön, 1996), but without people who have the willingness to become engaged with the data and have the know-how to unpack data tables by asking questions, looking for patterns, forming hunches, challenging interpretations, and putting a story to those data, the knowledge contained in data will be concealed and unavailable. Indeed, most accountability systems, in both K–12 and in higher education, lack the structures, tools, and processes to be an effective means of organizational learning. Postsecondary institutions are rich in data but poor in the means and know-how of organizational learning. The barriers to organizational learning inherent in the structure and culture of institutions of higher education are explanatory factors for the limited impact accountability systems have within the classroom, the counseling center, the student activities office, and the learning resources center, among others.

Recognizing that data and campus-level practitioners are at the heart of organizational learning and change, researchers at the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education created an intervention that involves practitioners in data practices designed to create new knowledge and bring about change within themselves and their institutions (Bauman, 2005; Bauman and others, 2005; Bensimon, 2004; Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, and Vallejo, 2004; Pena, Bensimon, and Colyar, 2006). This intervention, which goes by the name of Equity Scorecard, is being implemented in two- and four-year public and independent colleges throughout California, the University of Wisconsin system, and several

other states. In this chapter, we describe the principles of the Equity Score-
card as well as its core components.

The Equity Scorecard: A Learning and Change Intervention

Modeled after the Balanced Scorecard for business (see Kaplan and Norton, 1992) and the Academic Scorecard for Higher Education (see O'Neil, Bensimon, Diamond, and Moore, 1999), the idea for the Equity Scorecard was initially developed when it became evident that equity, although valued, is not measured in relation to educational outcomes for traditionally marginalized students in higher education. The scorecard is a tool and an established process to develop evidence-based awareness of race-based inequities among practitioners and to instill a sense of responsibility for addressing these gaps. Simply put, the outcome sought through the Equity Scorecard is for campus practitioners, including presidents, faculty members, counselors, deans, and directors, to become local experts on the educational outcomes of minority students within their own campus and to come to view these outcomes as a matter of institutional responsibility.

These two goals (awareness of outcomes inequities and accountability for eradicating inequitable outcomes) are stressed for two reasons. First, we have found that campus participants in institutions that are racially diverse, in fact even in minority-serving institutions (Contreras, Malcom, and Bensimon, forthcoming), are often impervious to racially stratified educational outcomes. Second, when race-based disparities become evident, campus actors are more likely to externalize the problem and attribute it to student characteristics or circumstances that lessen their own responsibility or institutional fault (Bensimon, 2007). The prevalence of special compensatory programs to address the educational and social needs of minority students on virtually every college campus is indicative of the extent to which student success is understood as being primarily a student responsibility. Although we do not deny the power of individual student agency to determine the quality of the collegiate experience, we also believe that institutions have a responsibility for creating the necessary conditions for equitable educational outcomes. Just as institutions are now expected to be accountable for student retention and graduation, the same expectation should be held for equity. Institutions, through their policies as well as the practices, attitudes, and knowledge of their members, have the power to create the conditions that make student success possible or perpetuate race-based inequalities.

Unlike the great majority of campus interventions intended for minority students, the Equity Scorecard is an intervention designed to create learning and change among practitioners. The prevalence of inequality, we believe, reflects a learning problem of practitioners. Specifically, the taken-for-granted knowledge that practitioners have acquired over time about

teaching and learning, and which they have found to be effective in the past, now may be failing them. Many faculty members lament that students today are not like the students from the past. This jeremiad is often heard on campuses that, as a consequence of unplanned demographic changes, are experiencing a cultural chasm between their predominantly White faculty and predominantly minority students.

Higher education practitioners have been socialized to a model of teaching and learning that is based on individualism; thus, when students do not do well academically, we are inclined to look into their behaviors for explanations. For example, we may notice that the student has not attempted to seek assistance during designated office hours or take advantage of the tutoring services that are available in the learning center. Lack of cultural knowledge may keep us from noticing the ways in which we, unknowingly and unintendedly, create the conditions that prevent students from behaving according to our expectations (Pena, Bensimon, and Colyar, 2006; Steele, 1997).

Simply stated, the learning problem of institutions and practitioners lies in the failure to recognize that one's best practices may not be effective with students who are not familiar with the hidden curriculum of how to be a successful college student. The challenge is to uncover what might enable educational practitioners to address unequal educational outcomes among minority students as a problem of institutional and practitioner knowledge.

The Equity Scorecard as a Means of Learning and Change

The guiding principle of the Equity Scorecard is that "learning and change are made possible by the engagement of practitioners in a collaborative and productive activity setting" (Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, and Vallejo, 2004; Wenger, 1998). By practitioners, we mean just about any campus professional whose beliefs, knowledge, and practices can affect the outcomes of minority students. For example, extremely high percentages of new minority students are placed in noncredit basic math and English courses. One of the biggest obstacles to minority student success is getting through basic math courses successfully, and a great number of students drop out without ever having taken a college-level math course. In the Equity Scorecard framework, the basic skills math instructors are practitioners whose unconscious actions, informed by tacit knowledge, can be a tremendous source of motivation and support for minority students—or one of despair and self-doubt.

Accordingly, the involvement of math instructors as members of an Equity Scorecard team is a means of increasing their awareness with the hope of moving them to reflect on the role they can play to ameliorate unequal outcomes. The same is true for counselors who help students plan their future, administrators who control the allocation of resources, program directors who oversee student support services, and so on (for a more in-depth discussion of the theoretical grounding of these ideas, see Bensimon,

Polkinghorne, Bauman, and Vallejo, 2004; Bensimon, 2007; Pena, Bensimon, and Colyar, 2006).

The means of engaging practitioners in a collaborative activity is by the formation of small campus teams that typically work together for a year, meeting monthly for about two hours. The activity on which these teams collaborate involves making sense of easily accessible institutional data that are disaggregated by race and ethnicity. During the meetings, team members collaborate by examining the disaggregated data collectively, raising questions about the data, deciding what additional data they should look at to answer their questions, and challenging others' assumptions and interpretations about the data. In community colleges, one outcome of the teams' collaboration is the creation of an Equity Scorecard with key indicators of student success, organized by four concurrent perspectives: academic pathways, retention and persistence, transfer readiness, and excellence. Each perspective focuses on specific aspects of institutional performance with respect to equity in student outcomes.

Examining Disaggregated Student Outcomes Data. Prior to the first team meeting, we ask the institutional researcher to complete a data spreadsheet that we refer to as the "vital signs." The vital signs consist of data that are routinely collected on most campuses, disaggregated by race/ethnicity. We call them vital signs because they provide insight into the health and status of an institution with respect to equity in student outcomes (Bensimon, Hao, and Bustillos, 2006). For example, "the number and percentage of students who earn an associate degree within six years" is a vital sign for the retention and persistence perspective for the Equity Scorecard. At a community college, "completion of 60 or more transferable units" and "transfer to a four-year institution in three years or less" are vital signs for the transfer readiness and excellence perspectives, respectively. The vital signs provide a starting point for the teams' examination of data by highlighting potential gaps and inequities in student outcomes. The format of the vital signs is tailored for people who are not accustomed to examining data. Based on our observations, the capacity to make sense of data requires specialized practices that are underdeveloped on most college campuses. This is reinforced by a point we made earlier: institutions have a wealth of data but are impoverished in their capacity to make sense of them.

While reviewing and discussing the vital signs data collaboratively, team members are encouraged to ask questions. Say, for instance, that a team discovers a gap among Latino/a students who earn associate degrees. The following questions may be raised by team members: "How many Latino/a students in the cohort indicated that earning the associate degree is their educational goal?" "How many Latino/a students in the cohort have completed the English and math courses that are required for the associate degree?" "How engaged are Latino/a students in educationally purposeful activities that enhance learning and produce desired outcomes?" "Are they earning grades in their courses that would allow them to persist to the completion of

the associate degree?" As questions like these are raised about the data, team members discuss and agree on those that should be pursued in subsequent meetings. This step entails deciding what new data they would like the institutional researcher to prepare and present at the next team meeting. For instance, the team may decide to examine data that illustrate students' educational goals in order to learn how many Latino/a students are pursuing an associate degree. The team may also look at student progression through math and English course sequences to see if Latino/a students have completed the associate degree requirement in these subject areas. Finally, to answer questions about students' academic performance, the team may choose to look at grade point averages and course completion rates.

What is unique about this process is that team members take the role of researchers rather than relying on the knowledge produced by outsiders, such as consultants or university researchers. In this research model, the researchers, all team members, assume the role of facilitators and learners. As facilitators, we create the structures, tools, and processes of organizational learning that the great majority of colleges, regardless of selectivity or wealth, lack. As learners, we observe and document the impact of practitioner-driven research as a means of self- and institutional change. That is, we observe whether the math or English instructor, counselor, or others in the team are more open to reconsidering their own practices and how they might change them in order to improve student outcomes.

Constructing an Equity Scorecard. Once the team has gone through the cycle of reviewing vital signs data, discovering potential areas of inequity, asking questions about the data, and reviewing subsequent data, they work collectively to agree on indicators that will be included in the Equity Scorecard they will construct on behalf of the campus. For example, if the team finds that Latino/a students are disproportionately enrolled in basic skills English and math courses that are not applicable to the associate degree, they may decide to include "successful progression from basic skills to college-level English" and "successful progression from basic skills to college-level math" as indicators in the academic pathways perspective of its Equity Scorecard. They may also discover that many Latino/a students do not persist beyond a critical gateway course within the sequence, English 100, for example. Gateway courses are those that serve as entry or exit points to graduation, transfer, or completion of basic skills requirements. Thus, students who are not successful in these courses are disadvantaged in several respects, notably time to degree completion. As such, the team may decide to include "successful completion of English 100" as one of its Equity Scorecard indicators. The team continues this type of analysis and collaborative sense making until they have examined data and developed indicators for all four of the Equity Scorecard perspectives. Once the team has constructed the scorecard, their next task is to disseminate their findings to stakeholders who can use the knowledge to mobilize change.

Sharing Equity Scorecard Findings with Stakeholders. In addition to working collaboratively to learn about the state of equity on behalf of their institution and constructing an Equity Scorecard, team members are charged with disseminating their findings to the campus. As noted in Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, and Vallejo (2004), "The opportunity for institutional change lies in the possibility that individual participants will transfer their learning to other contexts within the institution, and in doing so, enable others to learn and to change" (p. 113). The teams disseminate their learning and findings by way of a comprehensive written report to the president of the institution. In the report, the team discusses the data that served as the focal points of its analysis, the gaps and inequities they discovered within each perspective, and recommendations for actions and further inquiry. Moreover, throughout the process, the team disseminates its findings by making presentations to stakeholder groups that shape and influence campus policies and practices with a direct impact on equity in student outcomes. The academic senate, strategic planning committee, academic deans, and academic departments in which the most significant inequities exist (for example, math and English) are examples of some of the groups to which the team presents its findings. Finally, team members take their new-found knowledge and awareness of inequities in student outcomes to other committees, task forces, and other groups in which they participate. We ensure that the learning that takes place among the members of the Equity Scorecard team is diffused throughout the campus by including team members who are boundary spanners, serving on institution-wide committees which have access to multiple audiences.

Conclusion

Racial/ethnic disparities in student outcomes are a reality at most colleges and university in the United States. We believe that the intellectual capital and resources that are necessary to respond effectively to this unfortunate reality are often situated within institutions. We also believe that compensatory programs that aim to eliminate racial/ethnic student deficits alone are not sufficient to bring about equity in student outcomes. Alternatively, the Equity Scorecard approach has proven to be an effective institutional learning and change intervention.

Applying Harper and Bensimon's concept of color consciousness (2003), responding to the realities of race requires institutional leaders to focus purposefully and intentionally on equity in student outcomes to ensure that their institutions are welcoming, affirming, and responsive environments for groups that historically have been denied access to the benefits of higher education. The Equity Scorecard provides the means and the context for institutional leaders to develop color-consciousness and thereby build their capacities to assess and respond to race-based disparities in student outcomes.

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