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Vijay Pendakur

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# Designing for Racial Equity in Student Affairs: *Embedding Equity Frames Into Your Student Success Programs*

By Vijay Pendakur



*Vijay Pendakur is the Robert W. and Elizabeth C. Staley Dean of Students at Cornell University. His research and practice focus on equity-minded strategies to close the opportunity gap for underserved college students.*

**I**n 2015 and 2017, the JED Foundation and the Steve Fund conducted a Harris Poll to better understand challenges college students face (Equity in Mental Health Framework, n.d.). Among many other insights, the Harris Poll reveals significant differences in the ways that students of color experience college as opposed to their White peers. Only 69% of first year students of color rate their overall college experience as good or excellent, compared to 80% of White freshmen. Only 28% of the students of color surveyed rated their campuses as inclusive, compared to 45% of the White survey participants. Of the students of color, 46% reported strong feelings of isolation, while 30% of White students reported similar feelings.

## In Short

- Recent surveys demonstrate that students of color are less satisfied, and more isolated, on their campuses.
- Students of color are a rapidly growing portion of the total students in higher education in both undergraduate and graduate programs.
- Equity-mindedness is a key corrective lens for student affairs practitioners to use when engaging students of color outside of the classroom.
- Equity design frames such as centering an asset lens and identity-conscious program design can empower students of color to thrive in cocurricular activities and programs.

**Equity-centered consciousness requires practitioners to adhere to several key principles. These include, first, having a clarity of language, goals, and measures, and, second, being color-conscious and cognizant of the fact that inequities within higher education are often created and maintained by systems.**

I have selected only a few of the numerous survey results on this topic, but the story is quite clear: students of color are chronically and pervasively underserved in American higher education.

On its face, this should be a concern to colleges and universities, but to fully see the urgency of the crisis it's important to also take into account shifting demographic trends in our country. Students of color made up just 29.6% of undergraduate students in 1996 but had grown to 45.2% by 2016 (Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, & Chessman, 2019). In graduate education, the percentages shifted from 20.8% to 32% over the course of those two decades (Espinosa et al., 2019). Taken in concert with the facts from the survey, students of color are not only underserved, they are a rapidly growing portion of our students.

As a number of campuses now enter a *majority minority* era, the abundance of non-White learners in our classrooms, residence halls, and student union buildings brings into sharp relief the equity chasm facing our industry. Our institutions, for the most part, were not designed to serve students of color. These students clash with the White normative design of higher education. This dissonance is felt in their lower persistence and graduation rates, their higher dissatisfaction with the collegiate experience, and the increasing acuity of mental health distress in student of color communities. Students of color live in the equity gap: the space between higher education's exclusive past and the reality of its diverse future.

Student affairs practitioners are uniquely situated to address this equity gap. The student affairs enterprise now encompasses a significant breadth of the out-of-classroom learning on college campuses. From residential education to student organizations to orientation and opportunity programs, student affairs programs represent a broad set of cocurricular spaces and offerings to empower students of color to truly flourish in higher education.

However, this potential is often underrealized. Student affairs educators continue to use practices and frameworks that underserve racialized communities. In part, this is reflective of a lag between theory and practice. The scholarship in the field of higher education administration has evolved rapidly to produce numerous works that incorporate the gains of critical theory and equity design into how student affairs professionals are supposed to execute their work (Dugan, 2017; Quaye & Harper, 2014). However, while we wait for these advances in scholarship to turn into a fundamental shift in the way student affairs professionals are educated and trained, we need strategies and tactics to enhance equity in the cocurricular present.

This transformation requires student affairs administrators to be equity-minded. Bensimon, Dowd, and Witham (2016) wrote that equity-centered consciousness requires practitioners to adhere to several key principles. These include, first, having a clarity of language, goals, and measures, and, second, being color-conscious and cognizant of the fact that inequities within higher education are often created and maintained by systems. These are just two examples of principles that help us see an approach to embedding equity within our design processes.

In addition to the equity design guidelines provided by Bensimon et al. (2016), student affairs practitioners should be incorporating several key equity frames into their approach to working with students and building programs to transform students' lives. Two of these equity frames and examples of how they work can provide guidance for further development of equity-centered programs.

## **COMBATING DEFICIT THINKING WITH AN ASSET LENS**

Higher education has long used a deficit lens in the ways institutions engage with students of color. In the 1990s and early 2000s, when colleges and

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universities began to focus more on increasing access to higher education, students of color were faced with the question, “Are *you* college ready?” In the mid-2000s, through to present day, when the industry has come to focus more on college completion, students of color face the question, “Why aren’t *you* graduating at the same rates as White students?”

These questions involve a deficit lens because they position students of color as a problem, presumably due to some inherent deficit or brokenness on the part of the students themselves. This assumption of a deficit becomes a generative lens that shapes the university’s understanding of the problem and the natural corrective response. A deficit lens produces interventions that attempt to fix the student, fill the gap, or build resilience without ever holding the institution itself accountable for the equity gaps between students of color and their privileged White peers.

In her seminal article on cultural capital, Tara Yosso (2005) wrote, “Indeed, one of the most prevalent forms of contemporary racism in US schools is deficit thinking” (p. 75). A deficit lens is both racist and counterproductive, as it obscures the institutional factors that often contribute to the student experience.

Equity-minded practitioners must adopt an asset lens to reframe institutional questions so that the policies, systems, and environments that contribute to student success or distress are the focus of analysis. By asking questions about our institutions, we can frame solutions that hold our campuses accountable and combat the deficit orientations in

our workplaces that stigmatize the very presence of students of color. Equity-minded design centers questions such as, “Are *we* student ready?” or, “What institutional factors are creating our opportunity gaps for students of color?”

Beyond reframing questions to combat deficit thinking, asset mindedness challenges us to view students of color as bringing many assets into higher education, which are underutilized in how we empower them while they are in college.

Equity-minded student affairs practitioners have the opportunity to take an asset-based approach to working with students of color if they are able to harness other forms of capital that communities of color often have in abundance, such as navigational capital, aspirational capital, or linguistic capital. Yosso (2005) offered five of these alternate forms of capital in her theorizing about community cultural wealth as an asset-based expansion of social capital for people of color. Some examples of asset-based approaches to empowering students of color in the cocurricular program are:

- Conduct a Community Cultural Wealth Walk or an Asset Inventory exercise (Fujimoto, Fujimoto & Huang, 2016) with students of color to help them identify the numerous capacities and experiences they bring to campus that can help them drive their own success.
- Apply an anti-deficit lens to any remediation programming on your campus. Examine messages and programmatic components in areas such as probation advising or men of

color graduation initiatives to see if students of color are being positioned as lacking, broken, or the cause of the problem. If deficit approaches are found, rethink these interventions using an asset lens.

- In early engagement efforts, such as orientation, first year experience, or first year residential programming, make use of a values affirmation statement (Sherman & Cohen, 2006) to help students of color reduce the effects of stereotype threat on campus. These asset-based creative writing exercises are easy to implement, cost nothing, and have been shown in controlled studies to increase the performance of students of color in predominantly White learning environments (Rendón Linares & Muñoz, 2011).

## IDENTITY-CONSCIOUS PROGRAM DESIGN

Equity-minded practice also requires us to be race conscious in the way we engage students in the cocurricular area. Race is a salient factor in many students of color's lives, especially when confronted with a White-normative campus culture, a majority White faculty, and frequent experiences of racial micro-aggressions in the spaces in which they live, play, and learn. Sadly, the core cocurricular approaches to student engagement still continue to operate under the banner of race neutrality or a one-size-fits-all approach that is rooted in Whiteness as a norm.

In the Harris Poll referenced at the start of this article, one survey question asks about this specifically, and students of color were far more likely than their White peers to say that their college or university takes a one-size-fits-all approach to student engagement, with 61% of students of color agreeing with this item versus only 36% of their White peers. Identity consciousness broadly, or race consciousness specifically, is a much needed corrective to this industry-wide problem (Pendakur, 2016).

For example, consider new student orientation programs at predominantly White institutions. These one-size-fits-all interventions aspire to prepare incoming students to succeed in higher education through an onboarding experience often involving a multiday engagement that takes significant effort to plan and execute. Most of

these orientation models, however, do not take an identity-conscious approach to creating space for racialized student communities to have an honest conversation about the hidden curriculum of success for them at that institution.

An equity-minded practice of orientation would recognize the need to create separate conversations for students of color, where they can get together and engage with staff and faculty that know these communities and their experiences well. This student of color orientation pullout would feature honest dialogue about the strategies and resources that will drive their success at that institution. These race-conscious onboarding practices would also create spaces to candidly name some of the institutional challenges that students of color might feel on their road to graduation and to proactively build success plans, peer success networks, and faculty/staff mentorship connections to help students of color overcome these institutional barriers and graduate successfully.

There are other examples of race-conscious cocurricular programming beyond student orientation:

- Men of color empowerment programs that center an asset lens (see previous section) while creating unique spaces for these students to name their intersectional experience, form bonds of trust and mentorship, and make connections with staff and faculty that identify as men of color to drive a community of empowerment.
- Women of color wellness circles to address the unique, intersectional mental and emotional challenges that women of color face as college students, while also providing a safer space for these women to share, connect, and grow together.
- Parent empowerment programs for first-generation families of color that offer resources, validation, and support for the families of first-generation students of color so that the family can even more effectively support their student as they aspire to complete their degree. These programs can actually engage families in understanding the hidden curriculum of student success so that they can be empowered to offer their students assistance on par with the support many privileged White students receive from their families.

## PAYING THE DEBT

As higher education settles into the 21st century, our industry is facing numerous tensions and potentially significant disruptions. From enrollment shortfalls to graduation challenges to a crisis of relevance in core curricula, our industry is being asked to transform on several fronts. One of those important transformations must be a fundamental shift toward equity and meaningful inclusion for students of color. The 20th century, in higher education, can be seen as a time of access without equity, leaving students of color at the margins of our campuses, sometimes succeeding in spite of

their institution rather than in partnership with a place they came to learn and grow.

If faculty and staff can adopt an equity-minded approach to shaping the cocurricular policies and programs, we can take a major step toward building a postsecondary education that offers students of color a place to truly thrive. By braiding equity frames into the way we conceptualize core components of the outside of classroom experience, we can empower students of color to realize an emancipatory vision of higher education as the great equalizer. In doing this, we can attend to the long overdue task of making good on our unpaid debt. ☐

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