

Ensuring an Equity-Minded Approach to Planning at College of Marin

A Recommendation from the Equity Focus Area Team

February 27, 2019

As David Longanecker, President of the Western Interstate Commission on Higher Education, notes in his foreword to *Confronting Equity Issues on Campus* (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012),

The equity gaps that currently exist in American higher education between White students and students of color are both indefensible and unacceptable. They're indefensible because they run directly counter to American ideals of equality—not only equality of opportunity but equality in life experiences. They're unacceptable because they erode the vitality of our society and undercut the financial viability of our nation (p. xi).

The California Community College system—and College of Marin specifically—are not immune from these equity gaps. Across the system, African American, American Indian/Alaskan, Hispanic, and Pacific Islander students persist and complete at significantly lower rates than White and Asian students (Foundation for California Community Colleges, 2017). The same is true at College of Marin (PRIE, 2017). These historical and systemic disparities in outcomes drive the California Community College System *Vision for Success'* focus on equity. The *Vision for Success* calls on colleges to “[cut] achievement gaps by 40 percent within 5 years and fully [close] those achievement gaps for good within 10 years” (p.16) and points to faculty and administrators to play a critical leadership role carrying out “both a shift in mindset and a shift in the way colleges and the system do business” (p.21).

This mandate for change and the aggressive goal to eliminate the achievement gap that accompanies it will require College of Marin to redouble its commitment to an equity-minded approach to planning, both in the Educational Master Plan and Strategic Plan. As part of this commitment, College of Marin faculty and administrators participated in the Center for Urban Education's Equity-Minded Teaching Institute in the Summer of 2018 to begin the work of assessing where we are as a College. This opportunity made it clear that there is significant work we will need to undertake to achieve our goal of success for all students. So, what does “equity-minded” at College of Marin mean? The Equity Focus Area Team of the Strategic Planning Task Force recommends College of Marin adopt the Education Trust-West definition of equity:

Equity means recognizing the historical and systemic disparities in opportunity and outcomes and providing the resources necessary to address those disparities (Education Trust-West, n.d.).

The Equity Focus Area Team also recommends using the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California's definition of equity-mindedness, derived from the work of Bensimon (2005). The term “Equity-Mindedness” refers to the perspective or mode of thinking exhibited by practitioners who call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes. These practitioners are willing to take personal and institutional responsibility for the success of their students, and critically reassess their own practices. It also requires that practitioners are race-conscious and aware of the social and historical context of exclusionary practices in American education:

In order to understand and become “Equity-Minded”, it warrants that various practitioners (faculty, administration, staff, etc.) assess and acknowledge that their practices may not be working. It takes understanding inequities as a dysfunction of the

various structures, policies, and practices that they can control. “Equity-Minded” practitioners question their own assumptions, recognize stereotypes that harm student success, and continually reassess their practices to create change. Part of taking on this framework is that institutions and practitioners become accountable for the success of their students and see racial gaps as their personal and institutional responsibility (Center for Urban Education, n.d.).

Because this definition of equity-mindedness calls on all faculty, staff, and administrators at the College to take ownership of racial equity gaps, the Equity Focus Area Team also recommends that each Focus Area Team test its draft objectives, action steps, and measures against these equity-minded questions:

- ✓ Do we call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes? If so, how specifically are we doing this in our team’s work? If not, how will we change that?
- ✓ Are we race-conscious and aware of the social and historical context of exclusionary practices in American education? If so, how is this shown in our discussions? If not, how will we change that?
- ✓ Do we understand inequities as a dysfunction of the various structures, policies, and practices that we can control? If so, how is this illustrated in our recommendations? If not, how will we illustrate it?
- ✓ Do we question our own assumptions, recognizing stereotypes that harm student success? If so, what examples can we cite? If not, what work do we need to do to ensure we are not engaging in stereotyping?
- ✓ Do we critically reassess our own practices and acknowledge that these practices may not be working? If so, how do our recommendations reflect this and call for change to practices? If not, what additional data might we need to determine what practices need revision?
- ✓ Are we accountable for the success of our students and see racial equity gaps as our personal and institutional responsibility? If so, how is this reflected in our team’s submission for inclusion in the Strategic Plan? If not, how can we better illustrate this commitment?

The Equity Focus Area Team makes these additional recommendations:

1. The equity and equity-mindedness definitions outlined above are to be adopted by the Board of Trustees at its April 2019 meeting and included in the Educational Master Plan and Strategic Plan, as well as other planning documents. Until the College settles on definitions for these important terms, we will lose valuable time repeatedly asking what we are talking about when we talk about equity. While other definitions exist, the Equity Focus Area Team believes these definitions accurately portray the challenges and opportunities College of Marin faces.
2. The Educational Master Plan should include a preamble that provides context for the importance of equity and equity-mindedness not as a topic of consideration, but as the way in which the College approaches all of its programs, practices, and policies. In this way it will be clear that addressing equity gaps is the responsibility of everyone and not a separate area to be worked on by certain individuals.

Finally, the Equity Focus Area Team offers these excerpts from Bensimon and Malcom (2012) to further frame the work we need to undertake as an institution committed our mission to provide equitable opportunities and foster success for all members of our diverse community:

Rather than starting out with students' characteristics and poor academic preparation as the culprit for inequity in educational outcomes, we frame inequity as *an indeterminate problem of practice*. We use the term *practice* broadly in reference to the actions of individuals such as an instructor, a counselor, or a dean, as well as to the practices and policies inscribed in an institution's structural arrangements and cultural characteristics (p. 28)

Rather than conceiving of inequity as a sign of student failure, we view it as a sign of institutional malfunction that calls for an investigation to learn what is not working and what changes need to be made. The changes may be in structures, pedagogical approaches, delivery of services, professional development, or policies; they may also need to be changes in individuals' knowledge and beliefs about race that prevent them from making judgments about what to do to facilitate the success of students of color (p. 28).

Higher education practitioners have been socialized to expect autonomous and self-regulating students who take responsibility for their own learning and they often assume that students know how to be students. Consequently, they may unconsciously attribute the lower rates of success that are experienced by African American, Latina, and Latino students, and other minoritized groups, to individual characteristics and backgrounds rather than to educational practices, institutional policies, and culture. Attributing unequal educational outcomes to students' lack of academic preparation, motivation, help-seeking behaviors, or engagement is problematic because, in addition to blaming the student, race-based disparities are made to appear as a natural occurrence that is not within the control of higher education practitioners (p. 29).

References

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