Equity-Mindedness and California Institutional Researchers

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Background

Diversity is a widely shared value in higher education, and is recognized as contributing to the educational and social development of our students. However, there are serious inequities in educational processes and outcomes that hamper efforts to create diverse and inclusive campuses communities that foster success for all students.

Institutional researchers, through their engagement with institutional data, are well positioned to recognize inequities in educational processes and outcomes. They can play a critical role in guiding inquiry into inequities to support organizational change, reducing inequities and expanding educational success.

But analyzing data is not sufficient to catalyze change, and many attitudes and behaviors can serve to reinforce preconceptions, stereotypes and deficit models, rather than advancing equity. Having an equity mindset, being Equity-Minded, facilitates inquiry and understanding that can support organizational change for equity.

However, principles of Equity Mindedness are rarely part of training for institutional researchers, and prior work on equity minded inquiry has found these attitudes and behaviors lacking in some institutional research leaders.

To better understand the prevalence of equity minded attitudes and behaviors among institutional researchers in California, a survey designed to measure attitudes and behaviors aligned with principles of equity mindedness was conducted among members of the CAIR Listserv. The survey findings suggest that there is a significant need for professional development in the area of equity minded inquiry among California institutional researchers, and that further study of the subject is warranted.

https://www.thedailystar.net/shout/life/news/the-phenomenon-cognitive-dissonance-1685263

IR traditionally values objectivity, not advocacy. To take action, an institutional researcher must overcome the professionally prescribed role of objective data provider, and structural constraints at their institution, to advocate for change. While institutional researchers are starting to address this contradiction, advocating for equity is still not always seen as a primary function of IR (Fingerson, 2018).

Measure: Social Justice Self-Efficacy (SJSE) Sub-scale of the Social Issues Advocacy Scale-2 (Marszalek et al., 2017)

Equity-Minded Practice

Equity-mindedness is a mental schema that provides a framework for understanding gaps in outcomes and the actions needed to close them (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2017). Equity-mindedness facilitates both the recognition of equity related outcome gaps, and also focuses actions on the institutional responsibility to mitigate such gaps, rather than attributing gaps to individual traits, or uncontrollable social determinants.

Equity-minded sensemaking goes beyond examining data and noticing equity gaps in outcomes. It involves interpreting these gaps as a signal that practices aren't working as intended and posing critical questions about how and why current practices are failing to serve students experiencing inequities. (Malcom-Piqueux, 2018, p. 52)

Research Questions

1. How prevalent are attitudes that reflect a principles of equity-mindedness among institutional researchers in California?
2. What institutional and personal characteristics correlate to equity-minded principles and advocacy roles for IR on higher education campuses?
3. Do institutional researchers perceive equity advocacy as one of their roles in IR?
4. What do institutional researchers perceive to be the barriers and facilitators to being an equity advocate on their campus?

Methods

Cross-sectional online survey of 1,275 CAIR listserv subscribers,
Survey consisted of 34 items in seven sections:
1. Institutional and Personal characteristics
2. Racial Privilege (RP)
3. Social Issues Awareness (SIA)
4. Confronting Discrimination (CD)
5. Social Justice Self-efficacy (SJSE)
6. Role as an advocate for equity
7. Facilitators and Barriers to organizational change for equity

People with a 'color-blind' attitude may be unable or unwilling to recognize the significant impact racism has on an individual's academic performance (López, 2003) and view gaps as reflections of individual ability (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015), or as the natural result of systemic or cultural factors beyond their ability to address. Being race-conscious includes being able to have difficult conversations around race (Spencer-Christy, 2016), and bring to the foreground systemic racism that impacts student performance (Witham & Bensimon, 2012).

Measure: Racial Privilege Sub-scale of the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS) (Neville et al., 2000)

- White respondents at private schools less conscious of Racial Privilege than Community college respondents.
- Linked to funding initiatives, or diversity of students?
- Avoidance of talk about race: *"Look for correlates of ethnicity (e.g. first-generation status) and focus on making a difference for those groups."*
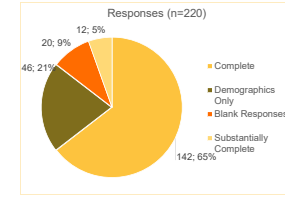
"Equity-minded individuals are more aware of the socio-historical context of exclusionary practices and racism in higher education and the impact of power asymmetries on opportunities and outcomes for African Americans and Latinas/os" (Bensimon et al. 2007, p. 33).

Recognition of the effects of systemic oppression on the educational outcomes of marginalized groups is a critical first step to taking action to address inequitable outcomes.

Measure: Social Issues Awareness (SIA) Sub-scale of the Social Issues Advocacy Scale (Nilsson et al., 2011)

- Respondents are highly aware of systemic issues related to equity.
- Tendency to separate societal forces from state and federal policy issues.
- Differing concepts of equity:
  - *"When groups want to target their own specific group without giving others an opportunity to participate is a subtle means of discrimination"*

Responses (n=220)

- Complete — 142; 65%
- Demographics Only
- Blank Responses
- Substantially Complete
- 46; 21%
- 20; 9%
- 12; 5%

Equity Mindedness diagram
- Race Consciousness
- Systemic Nature of Inequities
- Personal and Institutional Responsibility
- Reliance of Evidence to Guide Practice
- Taking Action to Eliminate Educational Inequities
- Equity Mindedness

Equality / Equity

Institutional researchers in their traditional roles in data acquisition and analysis are well positioned to be leaders in the use of evidence to guide practice.

"Organizational learning is based on the assumption that by providing people with data, information, and inquiry methods they can detect inaccuracies or errors and work to solve problems by creating better approaches to organizational work." (Kezar, 2014, p. 67)

Not measured in this study.

- IR jobs rarely have a formal equity role or assignment
- CCCs more likely to have them, CSU least likely
- *"it is often my job to pass along neutral information to be interpreted and used by other entities who may or may not have the same philosophy toward equity"*
- *"Fear of retaliation for raising difficult conversations through data"*
- *"feel hopeless in confronting issues of equity at their institutions"*

- Respondents from small baccalaureate schools, reported higher scores on Confronting Discrimination. They cite bias, racism, institutional culture as barriers to institutional change.
- In larger schools, Confronting Discrimination scores are lower, and respondents cite structural barriers to advocacy and change.

- *"The data, first and foremost"*
- *"Tell a strong story through evidence"*
- Knowledge gap: *"there is limited researcher understanding of why inequities exist and historical causes, lack of skills in facilitating conversations."*
- Many stated that data collected does not support inquiry into equity, and that time is not allowed for inquiry, just reporting.

An equity-minded institutional researcher with a sense of personal responsibility for the social justice goal of equity can help to focus inquiry on equity and organizational learning. Systems of accountability and prestige rarely reward equity, and the structure of institutional research does not generally support equity-minded advocacy, so personal responsibility is vitally important.

Measure: Confronting Discrimination (CD) Sub-scale of the Social Issues Advocacy Scale (Nilsson et al., 2011)

- Professional responsibility for confronting discrimination was significantly higher in Baccalaureate (small/private) schools than in the larger systems.
- *"Willingness to speak truth to power in shining a light on inequities … it is a professional responsibility"*
- *"IR professionals who do not view organizational change as part of their professional responsibility"*

Findings

Response Rate: 17.3% (or greater, as Listservs usually contain stagnant accounts). Underrepresents small institutions. Respondent demographics similar to published UC/CSU employee demographics.

21% of respondents exited the survey after entering demographic information, upon seeing the first questions measuring equity-minded principles (racial privilege, social issues awareness).

The four principle measures were all found to be reliable in this sample (Cronbach's alpha of .78 to .88), and factor analysis showed the responses loaded on 4 factors reflecting the principles.

IR professionals are very aware of issues of racial privilege, and social and policy determinants of educational access and outcomes. there are those who are uncomfortable expressing their opinions on these issues, which was starkly reflected in the large number of respondents that ceased responding when they arrived at questions regarding racial privilege and social issues awareness.

Multiple Race respondents report more supervisor support for addressing equity issues than White or Asian respondents.

Respondents described difficulty with openly discussing race and equity, were unfamiliar with concepts of equity, and did not feel comfortable discussing these with colleagues.

There were responses that made it clear that concepts of equity varied among respondents, for example confounding equity and equality.

Facilitators to Organizational Change for Equity
- Leadership
  - Departmental; Institutional
- Collaboration
- Knowledge & Skills

Inhibitors
- Same areas as Facilitators
- Maintenance of Status Quo
- Self-Efficacy

Limitations
- Self-selection of respondents
- Low sensitivity to differences among respondents
- Principles of Equity Mindedness are loosely defined, so proxy measures are adopted, and may not directly correlate with the principles
- Socially desirable positions, and the highly charged nature of questions of race and racism, may bias responses toward agreement with the principles (Sudman & Bradburn, 1974).

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