

The Accountability Side of Diversity

Estela Mara Bensimon, Donald Polkinghorne, Georgia Bauman

Even though individuals are likely to agree that equity is a desirable value, it is not something that is spoken about in relation to educational outcomes for specific groups of students. Institutions of higher education most often do not produce annual reports on measures of equity nor do they have equity-oriented benchmarks. An institution's success (or failure) in reducing educational inequities that severely restrict opportunity and upward mobility for students of color is not used as a measure of institutional effectiveness, and institutions are not ranked or graded on the basis of equity in educational outcomes. With the exception of Historically Black Institutions, intra-institutional stratification based on race and ethnicity is a reality in the majority of institutions of higher education, regardless of whether they are predominantly white, open-access, or classified as Hispanic Serving Institutions. However, the specificities of this intra-institutional stratification are largely invisible because equity in educational outcomes does not constitute a metric of institutional performance that is continuously tracked. For example, institutions do not monitor whether minority students are earning GPA's that will enable them to go on to graduate school. The tracking of some measures of institutional performance is a taken-for-granted routine, e.g., the average SAT scores of each freshman class. If an institution's leadership were to be asked what percentage of African American or Latino students graduate with a 3.5 GPA, most would need to run the numbers before being able to answer. Institutions are not in the habit of tracking whether the educational outcomes for African American and Latino students, such as GPA, are improving or declining. As an institutional researcher pointed out to us, *"When people ask me for data they do not ask me about the high GPA minority students."*

In this article we describe the Diversity Scorecard project, a process of developing awareness of inequities in educational outcomes that we developed in partnership with 14 urban colleges in Southern California and with the support of The James Irvine Foundation.

The Diversity Scorecard came about from the realization that the "diversity agenda" has been primarily about access to predominantly white institutions. Yet in California, as in many other states, urban colleges, private and public, two- and four-year, have served as the main entry point into higher education for students of color. For institutions like California State University at Los Angeles, Whittier College, and Los Angeles City College—all institutions that are part of our project—the challenge is not how to become more diverse because they already are. The challenge for these colleges is how to translate diversity in the student body into equity in educational outcomes.

The core principle of the Diversity Scorecard is that evidence (i.e., factual data) about the state of equity in educational outcomes for African Americans and Latinos can have a powerful effect on increasing the recognition by faculty members, administrators, counselors, and others about the existence of inequities as well as their motivation to resolve them. That is, in order to bring about institutional change, individuals have to see, on their own, as clearly as possible, the magnitude of inequities, rather than having researchers such as us tell them that they exist.

To get the project started we invited the presidents of the 14 colleges¹ to appoint a team of individuals to work with us on the development of their institution's scorecard. The task of each of the teams was to examine data disaggregated by race and ethnicity that would reflect educational outcomes in four general areas: access, retention, excellence, and institutional receptivity. Each team decided what types of data they would examine, and, based on their analyses, each team identified unequal outcomes for particular groups of students. The next step in the process was creating the actual scorecard, which entailed selecting goals, measures, and benchmarks where unequal outcomes had been uncovered in each of the four general areas. The last step was presenting the completed scorecard in a report to the president.

Initially some of the participants were skeptical about the project. However, after two years of participation, the majority of participants feel that the process has been fruitful. One participant shared, *“At first I was very skeptical about this project. However I have found the approaches to data very useful. This push to look at data is spilling over to other areas such as curricular issues. Doing this project I’ve found many ways of thinking about data.”*

The act of breaking data down by race and ethnicity has provided many “aha” moments. For example, upon seeing remediation rates disaggregated by race and ethnicity a member of one institution said,

This is the first time that I’m aware of that anyone is looking at this problem by ethnicity and to this level of detail. [Now that it has been disaggregated] we can look more deeply and systematically at remediation rather than just the split between English and math. This is central on everyone’s mind. We can really raise conversation around this.

Thus, through the simple act of disaggregating existing data on basic indicators of student outcomes, our partner institutions have been able to locate very specifically the most critical gaps in the academic performance of African American and Latino students. The combined effort of the institutions resulted in the development of 58 fine-grained measures (available in our website: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CUE/projects/ds/diversityscorecard.html>). The following provides one example from each of the four perspectives.

Access Perspective

Example: The percentage of African Americans and Latino students who succeed in “gateway” courses. Gateway courses can be defined as those courses which serve as points of entry for particular majors (e.g., particular math courses serve as pre-requisites for engineering and business majors).

Retention Perspective

¹ The 14 Diversity Scorecard project institutions include: California State University Los Angeles, California State University-Dominguez Hills, California State University- Fullerton, Los Angeles City College, Los Angeles Valley College, Cerritos College, Santa Monica College, Riverside Community College, Whittier College, University of Redlands, University of La Verne, Occidental College, Loyola Marymount University, and Mount St. Mary’s College.

Example: The percentage of target group students who complete courses they have enrolled in within a term.

Excellence

Example: The average grade point average of Latino and African American students, by college/major at the point of graduation.

Institutional Receptivity Perspective

Example: The percentage of African American, Latino, and Asian American faculty in each college/department compared with the percentage of students from these ethnic/racial groups in each college/department (i.e., the percentage of African American faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences compared to the percentage of African American students in that college).

We believe that the disaggregation of data on educational outcomes by race and ethnicity and the determination of equity standards are evidence-based practices that will make individuals more conscious of the state of educational outcomes for historically underserved students and will enable them to act purposefully.

Our partners suspected that there were problems, but many relied heavily on anecdotal data, both to describe the problem and, in some cases, to justify why it is practically unsolvable. With very few exceptions, most of the institutions in the project lacked a disciplined and evidence-based approach to understanding educational outcomes and the dimensions and the extent of the equity gap. The issue in most of our institutions is not that the data are not available. It is more a question of institutional members not being in the habit of engaging in the kind of sustained conversations that are needed to transform information into knowledge. On this very point, a committee member observed, *“On this campus when we talk about issues and problems we often talk about mythologies. Evidence-based practices state where we are and where we need to improve. Making sense of evidence is part of the critical thinking process. The project is training me to think critically. I now look at some of the mythologies and ask about supportive data.”*

Committee members who have limited contact with institutional research offices and rarely “get their hands dirty” with data have shown genuine excitement about what they and others can learn. In one committee, a humanities professor enthusiastically commented, *“We have a chance to look at where we are. We can make arguments supported with numbers. Maybe we could even ask some new questions.”*

We are continuing our work with the 14 Diversity Scorecard institutions and have two overarching goals. First, we hope to raise awareness at each institution more broadly around the issues raised on each team’s scorecard in order bring about change. Second, we will work to institutionalize the use of data disaggregated by race and ethnicity such that it becomes a routine practice and disparities in outcomes by race and ethnicity become more readily recognized. Of course, we also hope that our partners will continue to analyze and discuss institutional data in a way that will continue to bring about new awareness.