WHAT IS EQUITY-MINDEDNESS

ESTELA MARA BENSIMON

University Professor Emerita
University of Southern California
Rossier School of Education

Bensimon developed the concept of equity-mindedness as a counter-narrative to perspectives attributing racial inequality in educational outcomes to student deficiencies derived from poor schooling, personal circumstances, and lack of good academic habits. Equity-mindedness upends the narrative of deficit and reframes racialized patterns of achievement as evidence of institutional and pedagogical dysfunctions. She and her colleagues at the USC Center for Urban Education (now merged with the USC Race and Equity Center) have elaborated on the concept of equity-mindedness in scholarly articles, reports, and practical tools. Bensimon's work on equity-mindedness has been recognized with many honors, including the Harold McGraw Prize in Education, and was recognized with the Association for the Study of Higher Education Presidential Medal. She now leads Bensimon & Associates, a consulting firm that provides services with a focus on racial equity to colleges, universities, and philanthropic organizations. She can be contacted at Bensimon@usc.edu.

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In the context of this document, Equity refers exclusively to racial equity. Equity-minded-ness (Bensimon, 2007) represents a cognitive frame that is characteristic of individuals who possess the knowledge and are willing to assess their own racialized assumptions about historically minoritized people.

A **Cognitive Frame** is a mental map of attitudes and beliefs that a person maintains to make sense of the world. A cognitive frame determines what information is collected, what is noticed, which questions are asked, how problems are defined, and what course of action should be taken. Three cognitive frames that govern how we understand racial equity are diversity-, deficit-, and equity-mindedness. Diversity- and deficit-mindedness are far more common than equity-mindedness. To achieve racial equity, leaders and practitioners must internalize the characteristics of equity-mindedness.

Equity-minded leaders understand that, historically, institutions of higher education, for the most part, have been designed by whites for whites, therefore, many solutions and practices that are expected to be equitable often do the contrary. Individuals who are equity-minded understand that all practices have racial consequences that can cause unintended harm. It is important to deconstruct "best practices" and ask "best practices for whom?"

Just as there is a tendency to think of oneself as "not racist" there is also a tendency to think of oneself as naturally equity-minded. Higher education leaders and practitioners, however, are not typically equity-minded—they must try to learn to become equity-minded. Favorable self-impressions and good intentions will not achieve racial equity. Equity-mindedness comes about from having specialized knowledge—it is not about being nice, caring, or sympathetic.

Accomplishing racial equity requires the knowledge and perceptiveness to notice the unintended production of racialization through commonplace practices, policies, educational reforms, decisions, definitions, and criteria to judge quality and qualifications. In other words, racialization is embedded in the everyday work of academic leaders and practitioners. Even though it may not be their intention to produce racialization, it is produced because they are not in the habit of noticing

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whiteness nor are they surprised by its ubiquity.

To clarify this, consider the following scenarios. They represent commonplace practices and contemporary trends in higher education that are considered color-blind.

- Student success initiatives rarely consider the racial identity of the participants or the architects of the initiative.
- Progress in student outcomes is celebrated but not disaggregated by race, hiding disparities among racially minoritized students.
- Professional development activities assume that 'best practices' work as 'best practices' for all, regardless of racial identity.
- The syllabi for learning communities is dominated by authors, activities, and other artifacts that represent the experiences of whites.
- Applicants for professional positions are expected to be experts in their content area—yet their expertise in working with minoritized students is not explored.

Equity-minded individuals assume that practices and policies **will not be race-conscious**; therefore, before implementing them, these practices and policies need to be interrogated by asking: is race explicit or implicit? In what ways might the practice or policy perpetuate racist outcomes? In what ways might the practice or policy build on the experience of whiteness? For example, a critical examination of dual enrollment would ask: Who has access to it? Do recruitment practices discriminate? Does the curriculum reflect racial inclusivity? Who teaches dual enrollment courses? and What are the outcomes for minoritized students?

Asking these types of questions creates an awareness of the many flaws in our systems and our thinking. Being equity-minded requires an understanding that racial equity and diversity are not the same, for example. Being equity-minded involves reframing race-based inequities as a problem of practice, policies, and structures that need to be remedied. Equity-mindedness requires awareness of how many groups within US society have been historically excluded from educational opportunities or marginalized within the structures and institutions that house those opportunities. For example, we speak of land-grant institutions without considering

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that their origins are expropriated indigenous land.

Being equity-minded also requires individuals to be aware of their racial identity. Individuals may have multiple identities, but individuals who are white are often not aware of the ways in which being white shapes what they notice or fail to notice. An equity-minded leader is able to read "race" even when race is not mentioned. They take their responsibility to safeguard racial equity seriously and consistently. Leaders understand they must become racially literate to exercise equity-mindedness with fidelity to its roots in critical race theory.

Equity-minded individuals must insist that all data be disaggregated by race and ethnicity to identify racialized outcome patterns. Because the disaggregation of data is not a standard operating procedure, many believe disaggregating enrollment data is sufficient and stop there. Consequently, they overlook that data on honors programs, majors, and participation in "high impact practices" if not disaggregated, make racialization in access to opportunity invisible.

A problem currently facing equity-minded leaders is that many people use the term "equity-minded" as if its meaning was self-evident and intuitive. The result is what Mclaughlin & Mitra, 2001 have described as a lethal mutation to capture the consequences of adopting practices without understanding their conceptual principles. Unfortunately, the popularity of the term equity-mindedness has turned it into a lethal mutation. It is mostly used without reflecting on its critical and anti-racist intents.

Before using the term, it is important to ask: How is race talked about and is it from a critical perspective? In what ways are the characteristics of equity-mindedness incorporated into the topic being addressed?

Finally, equity-mindedness is achievable. The Center for Urban Education (founded by Bensimon) created a set of tools that employ the methods of inquiry to assist practitioners and leaders in assessing themselves and their work against criteria of equity-mindedness. The tools are free and available at https://www.cue-tools.usc.edu.

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Additional Sources

Building Equity-Mindedness in Math Faculty
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