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Meeting the Moment Through Strategic, Measurable Institutional Equity-minded Indicators

By Sabrina Gentlewarrior , Isis Artze-Vega, Román Liera , and Raquel M. Rall 



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intended to support our students and transform our campuses. She is lead editor of the free access Racial Equity and Justice Institute Practitioner Handbooks, volumes 1 and 2 (<https://reji-bsu.org/handbooks/>).



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In Short

- Equity-minded practice, developed for higher education by Dr. Estela Mara Bensimon, is ideally suited to aid the academy in meeting the challenges of the moment.
- Most equity-minded literature focuses on tools to aid individual practitioners. Strategies are needed to help campuses engage in institutionwide equity-minded practice.
- The Racial Equity and Justice Institute's Institutional Equity-Minded Indicators offer campuses strategic, measurable, equity-minded goals focused on closing disparate outcomes and supporting the success of *all* students.

Many campuses are being forced to eliminate or modify their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies due to state prohibitions, while others have engaged in self-censorship in response to the federal government's anti-DEI actions, including issuing executive orders and the slashing of funding for equity-oriented work (Garces et al., 2025). Simultaneously, college students are increasingly diverse and continue to experience disparate outcomes (Gentlewarrior et al., 2024; McNair et al., 2020), and the barrage of anti-DEI sentiment and legislation increases the likelihood that students will struggle, compounding higher education's long-standing inability to successfully serve students of color and students from other vulnerable communities (Gupton, 2023; Maye, 2025). Rather than abandoning DEI efforts in higher education, Kezar and Culver (2025) reminded us that "now is the time to take stock, to reaffirm our commitment to this work, and to take the necessary risks to redesign our approaches, to address the root causes at the root" (p. 3).

Key to this reaffirmation and redesign is holding ourselves accountable to the students we serve. To that end, this article offers a set of institutional equity-minded indicators (IEIs) to help practitioners replace intentions with outcomes, ensure resources are deployed effectively, and track results, moving beyond good faith to proven effectiveness.

ADVANCING EQUITY THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL EQUITY-MINDED PRACTICE

The IEIs are based on Dr. Estela Bensimon's theorization of equity-mindedness in higher education. Equity-mindedness aids higher education in meeting the challenges of this moment, emanating from federal and statewide anti-DEI prohibitions, by centering practitioner and institutional responsibility in addressing disparate outcomes too often experienced by students of color and members of other vulnerable communities (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012; Center for Urban Education [CUE], 2020).

Despite the rhetoric surrounding equity practices, the research is clear: Equity-mindedness

supports *all* students, allowing us to actualize our institutional missions (Artze-Vega et al., 2023; Gentlewarrior et al., 2024; Gentlewarrior & Paredes, 2021; Liera & Desir, 2023; Rall et al., 2024). Equity-minded principles include synergistic practices intended to ensure data inform our work, consideration of how racism and other systemic factors impinge student success, and prioritize measurable goals supported by clear accountability mechanisms (CUE, 2020; McNair et al., 2020).

While extensive work has identified equity-minded efforts individual practitioners can advance, less has focused on applying equity-mindedness to institutional transformation (Gentlewarrior et al., 2024; Liera & Desir, 2023). It is nonetheless essential. Indeed, recent anti-DEI actions have exposed a harsh truth: equity initiatives are vulnerable and can be dismantled if not integrated across the university (Kezar & Holcombe, 2024). As practitioners undertake campuswide engagement in equity-minded practice, "the force for change toward equity increases, which drives organizational transformation" (Kezar & Holcombe, 2024, p. 27).

IEI DEVELOPMENT AND APPLICATION

The IEIs were created by the Racial Equity and Justice Institute (REJI), a higher education consortium established in 2014 comprising 38 institutions across all mission classes that are committed to centralizing equity-minded practice into all aspects of the academy (Gentlewarrior & Paredes, 2021; Gentlewarrior et al., 2024). The REJI established the IEIs to guide universities and colleges in embedding equity-minded practice institutionwide and for monitoring progress in doing so (Gentlewarrior et al., 2025).

IEI development began with a comprehensive review of the literature on accountability and racial equity in higher education; this information, combined with the authors' equity-minded practice experience, informed the drafting of the IEIs. The authors then met regularly for nearly eight months with 13 REJI members with broad knowledge of equity-minded practice campuswide who acted as advisors on the practicality, usefulness, validity, and reliability of the measures. Emphasis was placed on ensuring the indicators would inform and advance

equity-minded practice and transformation on campuses, honor the diversity of institutional types, and accommodate legislative and institution-specific factors that influence daily work. Finally, the IEs were reviewed and refined by 200 REJI members who provided feedback on the IEs that related to their institutional roles during an annual summit.

IEs were developed for the following key higher education functions:

1. Data and inquiry practices utilized to guide decision making
2. Goal setting and implementation
3. Admissions practices
4. Teaching and learning
5. Student support strategies
6. Strategic resource development and allocation
7. Providing an affordable education
8. Human resources practices
9. Equity-minded communication strategies

Readers are encouraged to review the comprehensive list of IEs (<https://reji-bsu.org/ieis/>; campuses interested in joining the REJI or using the IEs are encouraged to contact the REJI at info@reji-bsu.org for more information). While many of the IEs prompt campuses to demonstrate evidence of increased parity in student outcomes, some indicators are more process oriented. Examples of these more process-oriented IEs include encouraging trustees to form a racial equity committee of the board and creating and implementing equity-minded academic program review strategies.

In the future, campuses will have the opportunity to demonstrate accountability through external review by applying for institutional certification in equity-minded practice, supported by evidence in the nine IEI areas. Until then, the REJI's Racial Action Plan is available to aid campuses in establishing goals linked to the IEs, monitoring progress, and ensuring accountability (<https://reji-bsu.org/model/>).

While it is beyond the scope of this article to share all the IEs, we highlight several IEs that were selected for their salience in helping campuses navigate the anti-DEI challenges the academy is currently facing. Examples of campuses engaged in practices that exemplify the IEs are also shared.

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DATA AND INQUIRY IEs IN ACTION

Data are essential to implementing equity-minded strategies (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015) and engaging in evidence-based practice informed by disaggregated data has become routine on many campuses in order to advance equity-minded campus transformation. Equity-minded institutions disaggregate data first by race and ethnicity, then by other groups experiencing disparate outcomes to reveal inequities in student outcomes; these data inform their efforts to advance equitable student success (CUE, 2020; McNair et al., 2020).

The federal government is currently discouraging data disaggregation to guide institutional decision-making and action (Department of Justice, Office of the Attorney General, 2025). In response, legal practitioners have strongly disputed this injunction and called this prohibition from the federal government "misguidance" (Education Counsel, 2025, pp. 5-6). The IEs focused on data and inquiry underscore the continued importance of disaggregating data and provide clear guidance on how to use data to inform practice. An example of one of the data-related IEs follows.

- *Disaggregated data:* Disaggregate data by race and ethnicity for key student success metrics (including but not limited to retention, persistence, on-time credit accumulation, graduation). Report the data annually to key constituencies who utilize the information to inform action.

REJI institutional member Cape Cod Community College (CCCC) moved from a stance of race-neutral data practices that obscured disparities to the equity-minded development of an equity matrix to visually illustrate equity gaps in various student success indicators among student groups (e.g., Black, Latine,

Pell recipients), raising questions about barriers faced by students of color. As an example of a campus holding itself accountable to equity-minded data, the college implemented strategies (e.g., removing standardized placement exams; programming to promote diversity, inclusion, and belonging; and revising of policies and practices toward the use of culturally sensitive language and processes) to close disparate student outcomes and support the success of all students (Rodriguez et al., 2021). CCC's use of equity-minded data led to the creation of a campus-wide equity-minded operational plan that included a review of the student equity matrix and strategic plan, adoption of equity-minded principles into the operational plan, and inclusion of equity-oriented measures to evaluate progress (McCarron et al., 2024).

TEACHING AND LEARNING IEIs IN ACTION

Despite varied student success initiatives, campuses continue to operate in ways that contribute to Black/African American and Latine students' grades and course completion rates lagging those of their White and Asian counterparts. One important misstep is the lack of attention paid to teaching practices, which have been identified as key levers for advancing racially equitable outcomes in higher education.

Course-taking is the only sustained experience required of students at our institutions. Faculty have among the greatest impact on students' sense of intellectual capacity and overall belonging (Cox, 2009; Nunn, 2021). Yet "the great majority of faculty... have been or still are first-generation equity practitioners"; that is, equity efforts are new to them, and they are insufficiently supported in this work (Bensimon & Gray, 2020, p. 70).

North Shore Community College (NSCC) illustrates how the following IEI prompts institution-level attention to teaching and learning:

- *Program review:* Measurable program-level racial equity academic outcomes are assessed in program review and plans for measurable action are created and implemented based on review.

NSCC engaged in a year-long campuswide process focused on integrating values, practices, and principles of equity-mindedness into the college's academic program review process. Among the practices instituted were the disaggregation of student enrollment and outcomes data by race and ethnicity and the

embedding of this capacity in their data dashboard; inquiry and action regarding the use of accessible course materials and program facilities; a review of the inclusiveness of course design and learning materials; verification that faculty participate in equity-minded professional development opportunities, such as asset-based and culturally relevant pedagogy; and reporting on the diversity of the faculty and programs' advisory boards (Stevens et al., 2024).

At a time when faculty are under increased scrutiny, including what and how they teach, institutional leaders need to explicitly support faculty. While this is clearly more difficult in states with anti-DEI legislation, trustees, presidents, and other senior staff can craft an institutional mission and campus ethos that emphasize the support of all students—with teaching and learning at the core of institutional endeavors. Leaders should reassure faculty that the use of disaggregated data, equity-minded pedagogies, and DEI-related content in teaching and scholarship are neither discriminatory nor ideologically based and, indeed, help all students learn more and be more successful.

STUDENT SERVICE IEIs IN ACTION

The critical importance of ensuring that student affairs and other student-facing cocurricular services are informed by equity-mindedness has been emphasized by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (2022). Yet typically, practitioners have not been prepared to do so (Liera et al., 2025). The IEIs point to key areas to work toward parity, including student conduct referrals and proceedings, student leadership participation and benefits, and physical and mental health indicators. The creation of race-conscious resources being made available to the entire student body is also reflected in the IEIs, including ensuring students' identities are represented in campus art, food, building design, and so on.

At a time when national discourse discourages campuses from seeking and acting on the lived experiences of students of color, one of the IEIs provides a counterresponse:

- *Institutionalized structures designed for students:* Students of color are provided welcoming and accessible means to share their campus-based experiences of racial inequity and receive support and redress beyond legally mandated equal opportunity reporting.

Bridgewater State University, REJI member and convening institution, exemplifies this IEI through its Speak Your Piece Program. Accessible and advertised to all students, this monthly program offers students the opportunity to share experiences with institutional barriers to racial equity. Trained student facilitators, who are supported by faculty and staff, lead the sessions. The feedback is used by senior leaders who hold themselves accountable as they set and advance goals intended to address the obstacles identified by students (Clark et al., 2024). For example, after hearing that students of color and other student groups wanted to ensure their needs and perspectives informed building design and utilization, an equity-minded policy and approach was developed and is being implemented in a major building renovation including the display of art that represents the diversity of the campus' students, vibrant colors on walls and furnishings that feel more like home, and an emphasis on collaborative study and community spaces (Jason, 2024).

TRUSTEE LEADERSHIP IEIs IN ACTION

While the work of individual equity-minded practitioners across campus is critical, the inclusion of higher education governing boards ensures this work is campuswide, institutionalized, and effective. The board's primary responsibility is to make high-level decisions on behalf of the institution and its students (Rall et al., 2024). This mission-centric decision making involves roles and responsibilities for setting and monitoring strategic priorities like embedding racial equity into the mission statement, strategic plan, and institutional goals (Rall & Morgan, 2024). Boards are also integral to institutional accountability and hold the president/chancellor and other senior decision makers accountable for progress (or lack thereof) toward explicit equity metrics. Without the board's visible, consistent, and mission-aligned commitment, equity-minded efforts often stagnate, remain isolated, go underfunded, or solely become pet projects of key employees or departments rather than institutional imperatives. Trustees lead necessary institutional change by ensuring equity efforts are integrated across campus rather than remaining isolated initiatives (Rall et al., 2020, 2022, 2024, 2025).

Boards using IEIs help dismantle silos, relieving overburdened faculty and staff who champion this work by integrating equity work into the campus' mission. IEIs embed equity into the institutional

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DNA, making it a permanent, funded, and protected priority for all students, staff, leaders, and faculty. One board-focused IEI highlights the resource allocation role:

- *Allocation of resources:* Allocate resources for budgetary, space, personnel, and other resources needed to support the success of students of color on campus that are explicitly aligned with the campus' racial equity goals.

Montana's bipartisan Modernization and Risk Analysis (MARA) Committee offers a powerful statewide structural blueprint for how governing bodies can embed this IEI. Tasked by state law to study "the long-term future budget and revenue needs of the state with changing economics and demographics," the MARA committee projects future budget needs across all sectors, ensuring that resource allocation for critical areas, including higher education, is based on well-considered, long-term projections and not political whims (Modernization and Risk Analysis Committee, 2023). This data-informed decision making provides institutions with the protection to continue to invest in important equity work. Boards are encouraged to leverage pertinent aspects of the MARA model to project and fund the strategies needed to serve their diverse student body.

CONCLUSION

Dr. Estela Bensimon (2024) reminded us that "equity-mindedness is achievable" (para 14). Rather than retreating from supporting the success of our increasingly diverse students, now is the time to engage in institutionwide equity-minded practice to navigate current challenges and fulfill our missions. The structure and practicality of the IEIs provide campuses with a guide when establishing strategic, measurable, equity-minded goals focused on advancing the success of *all* our students.

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AI was not used in the writing of this article. 

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