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PLANNING STORY

Leveraging Institutional Planning to Benefit Latinx Students Racially Disaggregated and Actionable Data Improve Community College Transfer Success

by Eric R. Felix, PhD

How can institutional planners make a difference for underrepresented minority students? Senior administrators at East Los Angeles College addressed inequities in Latinx student transfer rates with data-backed culturally-relevant strategies.

Formal planning is used throughout higher education to evaluate past performance, monitor institutional effectiveness, and set goals for future improvement (Auer 2016; Lovik 2014). The specific approach to planning can vary based on underlying motivations and intended outcomes. For example, strategic planning seeks to provide long-term institutional stability (Falqueto et al. 2019), integrated planning focuses on participatory decision-making that centers the mission and values of the organization (Auer 2016), and diversity planning prioritizes creating “more welcoming and inclusive environments” in higher

4 TAKEAWAYS . . .

. . . To Embed Equity into Institutional Planning

1. **Develop a planning process that explicitly identifies inequities** and seeks to address them.
2. Use and **explore racially disaggregated and actionable data.**
3. Intentionally identify and **select planning team members who have an equity-minded competence.**
4. **See planning as an opportunity** to create a more equitable institution.



education (Clauson & McKnight 2018, 43). Less discussed among these approaches is equity-driven planning (Ching et al. 2018) that emphasizes identifying institutional barriers, goal-setting to reduce equity gaps for specific populations, and developing strategies to achieve parity in outcomes. Equity-driven planning allows institutional leaders to understand root causes of disparities and develop strategies and interventions that explicitly support underrepresented minority student groups.

Institutional planning in community colleges is critical to assessing existing patterns of inequity and developing strategies to mitigate. Within California and across the nation, Latinx students comprise a large proportion of transfer-aspirants in community colleges, but they face significantly lower rates of academic success (Campaign for College Opportunity 2017; Jenkins & Fink 2015). This article describes how East Los Angeles College (ELAC) used equity-driven planning, known in California as student-equity planning, to craft a race-conscious plan that addresses inequalities facing Latinx students in their transferring to four-year institutions. I share insight from observing ELAC and how its leaders used the student-equity planning process to address Latinx transfer inequity through new culturally-relevant strategies. The following sections provide context on the equity planning process, describe how college leaders developed a race-conscious plan, and offer results from efforts targeting Latinx transfer inequity. I conclude with four considerations for leaders to leverage planning to improve outcomes for Latinx students in higher education.

Equity Planning at California Community Colleges

All 116 California community colleges are required by the state legislature to create and implement a “student equity plan,” a three-year document that guides institutional efforts to improve outcomes in specific academic areas: access, retention, progression through math and English courses, transfer to a four-year institution, and completion (Student Equity Plans §78220 2019). The student-equity planning process requires campuses to (1) document the extent of inequity for specific student populations (e.g., Latinx students, foster youths, veterans), (2) establish goals and metrics to address identified equity gaps, and (3) create or scale-up institutional efforts to achieve equity goals (Student Equity Plans §78220 2019). Key to this effort is the allocation of categorical funds by the legislature that provides new specialized equity funding intended to support robust planning and implementation (Felix & Fernandez Castro 2018). Over the last six years, the California state legislature has directed \$785 million to help community colleges improve equity and achieve the goals set out in their plans (Legislative Analyst Office 2019).

Since 2014, this equity-driven planning process has assisted community college leaders in understanding, identifying, and addressing inequity across academic outcomes (Center for Urban Education 2019). Tied to these equity efforts, California has also seen increases in degree attainment as well as progression to transfer-level courses (California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office 2020). The focus on equality and fiscal incentives embedded in



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the planning process provides an ideal opportunity for community colleges to write equity plans and develop new efforts that are aligned, explicitly, with addressing persistent racial disparities. Of particular importance is the way equity-driven planning prompts campuses to speak to and target equity gaps identified for racially-minoritized groups—but only if campus leaders choose to do so.

Leveraging Equity-Driven Planning to Address Racial Disparities

ELAC is one of a few institutions identified as using the equity-driven planning mandate to address the historic and pressing concerns facing Latinx students along the transfer pathway (Felix 2020). To leverage institutional planning for equity, I highlight four factors prompting ELAC leaders to use planning as a tool to address racial inequality.

First, the equity-driven planning process was designed to *explicitly uncover and address disparities in student outcomes*. Planning language prompted institutional leaders to use the opportunity “to ensure equal educational opportunities and to promote student success” by disaggregating data, identifying inequities in outcomes, and selecting specific student groups toward addressing inequities over a three-year period

(Student Equity Plans §78220 2019). The most recent guidelines identified the students as current or former foster youths, students with disabilities, low-income students, veterans, students in specific ethnic and racial categories, homeless students, and LGBTQ students. Rather than focus on all students, the equity-planning process required institutions to conduct campus-based research to document the extent of inequity for specific groups.

Second, this *equity-driven data inquiry* uncovered that Latinx students had the lowest rates of transfer success and experienced the longest time to completion (i.e., accumulation of units without transfer success) among all disaggregated groups. Rather than examine data in the aggregate, the planning process goes beyond binary approaches in institutional research such as grouping students as “traditional vs non-traditional” or “Underrepresented Minority (URM) vs Non-URM” (Hinton 2012; McNair et al. 2020). The required disaggregation of data by race and ethnicity provided planners with compelling evidence that Latinx students face severe disparities in transfer. One step further was that planners not only identified inequities, they were also encouraged to address specific areas where “significant underrepresentation is found to exist” through goal setting, activity development, and allocation of equity funds (Student Equity Plans §78220 2019).

Third was the *ability to intentionally select planning team members* for their commitment to racial equity and willingness to craft a plan that sought to improve institutional and student outcomes. As an institutional plan, student equity provided flexibility in who was



involved in the process. The State Education Code specified that “Student equity plans shall be developed with the active involvement of all groups on campus as required by law, including, but not limited to, the academic senate, academic faculty and staff, student services, and students, and with the involvement of appropriate people from the community” (Student Equity Plans §78220 2019). At ELAC, the vice president of student services was able to recruit a planning workgroup consisting of individuals who were like-minded, equity-oriented, cared about social justice, possessed high status on campus, and advocated

for improving the transfer experience for Latinx students. In turn, the planning workgroup displayed characteristics of equity-mindedness, as defined by Bensimon (2007), specifically being race-conscious, acknowledging the existence of structural racism, and recognizing the responsibility of institutions to address inequity and redistribute resources to the neediest groups on campus (Dowd & Bensimon 2015). Selected leaders, as a planning workgroup, reviewed their campus data, had discussions on identifying equity gaps, and proposed strategies and activities to improve student outcomes.



Fourth, *the availability of new fiscal resources* established by the state legislature allowed campus leaders to develop a robust and self-sustained student equity plan. As categorical dollars, equity funds were protected and to be used for that specific planning process. That meant that planners were free to allocate resources to developing and implementing an institutional plan that would move the needle on improving student outcomes. Institutional leaders benefited from having specific money to draw on when developing their student equity plan, and the specified funds lessened potential opposition on campus, because the race-conscious ideas in the document would not be diverting institutional resources or drawing from campus general funds. As the plan proceeded through campus review and approval, key internal stakeholders such as the academic senate and fiscal office were open to the presented ideas since funds for these race-conscious efforts were self-sustaining.

Results of the Equity-Driven Planning Process

Through the equity-driven planning process, ELAC institutional leaders were able to examine racially disaggregated data, identify glaring inequalities for Latinx students in transferring, and use accompanying fiscal resources to craft new evidence-driven and culturally-relevant strategies to close equity gaps. ELAC identified Latinx students as the institutional priority and proposed three distinct efforts based on the evidence provided by its Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Advancement (OIEA) and the discussions that ensued about what inequities to

spotlight within the plan. Campus planners developed a Latina Transfer Pathway, Men of Color Transfer Pathway, and Culturally-Relevant Summer Academy aimed to support racially-minoritized students through the transfer process, ultimately decreasing the campus average of eight years to successfully transfer out. Those efforts focused on providing multi-pronged support. Academic components of the efforts emphasized embedded tutoring in barrier courses such as math, English, and the sciences, as well as writing workshops for crafting personal statements. Similarly, the Latina Completion and Transfer Academy, Men of Color Academy, and Culturally-Relevant Summer Academy embedded curriculum from Chicana/o studies and sociology that highlighted Latinx heritage as assets in a student's transfer journey. Cultural components included leadership development, networking, and incorporating the family into the transfer process. For example, ELAC brought to campus the Latina playwright Josefina López to discuss her play and adapted movie, *Real Women Have Curves*, which centers around an academically gifted girl from East Los Angeles who dreams of attending college in New York. Those programs were also staffed with culturally-relevant personnel: Latinx tutors were hired and Latinx mentors who were successful transfers themselves were assigned to assist students.

The Latina Completion and Transfer Academy, Men of Color Transfer Academy, and Culturally-Relevant Summer Academy shifted the type of support available for Latinx students, and the campus planners who developed those efforts explicitly kept focus on Latinx student experience, identity, and



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cultural heritage to assist in the successful transfer to four-year institutions. Recently, ELAC was recognized by the Campaign for College Opportunity as a “2020 Champion of Higher Education” for its commitment to transfer success as a key racial equity strategy. The combination of a planning mandate focused on equity, requirement to disaggregate data and identify equity gaps, intentional recruitment of qualified workgroup members, and dedicated funds to carry out the vision of the plan all converged at ELAC to explicitly address and improve Latinx transfer inequity on campus.

The Opportunities for Equitable Planning

As Illich and Herwick (2020) had shared, the successful implementation of institutional planning “continues to elude many colleges and universities” (23). The process at ELAC highlights some of the factors that enable success in both creating and implementing a plan, especially one seeking more student-equitable outcomes. Not only did ELAC leaders create a comprehensive document to tackle pressing inequities on campus, they also established a deeper connection with the OIEA and cross-campus stakeholders, embedded equity in all planning processes, built transfer pathways for Latinx students,

and then scaled those efforts to serve all students on campus.

This final section discusses considerations for college leaders to use in planning for improving equity.

1. Designing for Equity

Centering the concept of equity into the design of the planning mandate, which required community colleges to examine their inequities by race and ethnicity, served as a catalyst for planners to address disparities in Latinx transfer. Practitioners said that the student equity plan finally offered the opportunity to pursue endeavors that sought parity in outcomes for racial groups. One individual shared how “the state finally gave them the license to be Latino-centric” because the planning guidelines focused on serving students who were facing the largest gaps. The guidelines prompted them to use equity resources for those identified groups.

Consideration: Planning must be seen as an opportunity to address longstanding inequity faced by students. When identifying gaps in outcomes, it is necessary to acknowledge the oppressive structures on campus that may perpetuate and exacerbate disparities in who is successful. The equity-driven plan, through its intentional language, designed a process where planners were empowered to name and address gaps in outcomes for specific student groups.



2. Having Racially Disaggregated and Actionable Data

Wentz et al. (2018) shared that “institutions often have a great deal of data but may not have useful data” or the personnel and resources to analyze and communicate data properly to decision makers in those planning roles (204). The requirement to disaggregate data by race as well as other important characteristics such as veteran, LGBTQ, or foster care status provided institutions with helpful data points to create an actionable plan. The racialized inequities uncovered from the process allowed planners to review, discuss, and, most importantly, act on data. Through the process campus leaders asked for more fine-grained data and support with interpretation, and were able to pinpoint inequities, creating a deeper collaboration with institutional researchers and cross-campus stakeholders (Illich & Herwick 2020).

Consideration: Having disaggregated and actionable data is critical to organizational improvement. As Wilson (2018) argued, “data [inquiry] allows the organization to recognize where it stands and the direction it needs to go,” but without the appropriate data, certain inequities can go “unnoticed,” limiting the type of change that takes place (1). Thus, disaggregating data by specific student groups is fundamental to carrying out equity-driven planning in higher education. Conducting this type of inquiry also requires institutional research practitioners to critically analyze and scrutinize their own practices, analytic approaches, and reporting

mechanisms that may limit the type of data examined and how it can be leveraged in improving student outcomes (Abrica & Rivas 2017).

3. Selecting Planning Members Based on Constituency and Competency

The story of ELAC is one in which committed planners developed a vision to improve racial equity and were prompted to do so by the mandates and resources attached to the institution’s equity-driven plan. The intentional recruitment of planners was critical in how the process unfolded and what ultimately was prioritized in the plan. The planning workgroup consisted of individuals who were “like-minded, equity-oriented,” possessed high-status on campus, and advocated for improving transfer success for Latinx students. In turn, the planning workgroup displayed characteristics of equity-mindedness, as defined by Bensimon (2007), specifically in being race-conscious, acknowledging the existence of color-evasive ideology, recognizing the responsibility of institutions to address inequity, and needing to redistribute resources to the neediest groups on campus (Dowd & Bensimon 2015). As a group, they reviewed their campus data, had discussions on identifying equity gaps, and proposed strategies and activities to improve student outcomes. The result was the forming of a workgroup of individuals who shared the values of commitment to social justice and equity for Latinx students.



The student equity plan, through its intentional language, designed a process where planners were empowered to name and address gaps in outcomes for specific student groups.

Consideration: Developing and implementing equity-driven planning requires leaders who have a certain set of skills, competencies, and experiences on campus. Institutions need to actively seek and identify reform leaders who are equity-oriented, comfortable discussing race and racial disparities, capable of developing race-specific strategies, and able to advocate for these efforts when getting the plan approved on campus. Practitioners possessing equity-minded competence might ask what are the policy possibilities to enact change to improve racial equity, either specifically articulated in legislative mandates or inferred in the spirit of the law? Through an understanding of equity and the causes of racial inequity, practitioners may then be able to see racial possibilities in reform efforts and strive for racial equity in community colleges.

4. Being Bold and Planning Toward a More Equitable Institution

ELAC's thoughtfully-crafted, race-conscious plan to tackle transfer inequity was made possible by several factors. Because an equity-driven plan seeks to address deep-seated inequalities on campus, institutional leaders

were prompted to work toward the ambitious goal of removing barriers to success for underrepresented minority students. Rather than settle for efforts that could support all students, planners at ELAC were empowered to identify inequities, establish goals, and create interventions for the groups that faced the largest disparities in transfer success: Latinx students.

Consideration: Planners should be encouraged to examine data in meaningful ways that highlight specific barriers for particular student groups. From that data analysis and subsequent discussion, new structures, programs, and practices should be proposed that center the experiences of those student groups, as was the case with ELAC. When planning efforts encourage color-evasiveness (Flores & Leal 2020), practitioners tend to create generalized solutions for specialized problems, failing to address racial disparities. The eradication of educational inequity can only be addressed when racial inequality is acknowledged and concentrated on by planners using racially-disaggregated data and creating race-conscious interventions. As some have argued (Flores & Leal 2020; Wilson 2018; Winkle-Wagner et al. 2014), there is a need to go beyond just naming racial groups in institutional plans, and working toward developing clear goals and strategies to enhance the conditions and outcomes for students.



Conclusion

Current educational realities require a new and persistent focus on equity. Institutions of higher education continuously welcome a more diverse group of students, including those who are racially minoritized, LGBTQ, veterans, and from foster care. As campuses become more inclusive, visible equity gaps arise among historically-marginalized populations that now find themselves in higher education (McNair et al. 2020). Student equity is progressed by the planning tools available for institutions to identify areas needing improvement, bring stakeholders together, and propose interventions to enhance student outcomes (Chance & Williams 2009; Driscoll 2010). Whether strategic, integrated, diversity, or equity planning, all efforts should serve to recognize policies, programs, and practices that need to be restructured or reimagined to better serve students and work toward truly equitable institutions. The lessons shared from ELAC provide four key considerations to leverage planning as a process and an opportunity for institutional equity transformation in higher education. Planning offers institutional leaders the chance to reflect on and revise existing practices and create a course of action for future success (Green 2017; Redding & Searby 2020). Taking the steps outlined in this article would enable leaders to meaningfully engage institutional planning processes and work toward using data to identify root causes of inequity and propose equity-minded strategies that can make a difference for underrepresented minority students.

WHAT WORKED

- Keeping a laser-like focus on **identifying and addressing glaring transfer inequities**.
- Creating student success **efforts that precisely targeted specific student groups**.

WHAT DIDN'T

- Recruiting a planning workgroup **without considering the composition and competencies possessed by members** to be able to address student inequities.
- **Planning without adequate resources** to move from ideas to action.

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