Examining the Field of Institutional Research: Towards More Equitable Practices

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Abstract: As equity is prioritized in higher education, institutional research (IR) offices become critical units to identify and address inequities faced by minoritized students. We conducted a discursive analysis of mission statements describing the function and purpose of IR offices across California's Community Colleges. Results are based on 28 reviewed statements and reveal a limited discourse around race and equity. None of the statements in our sample included the word race or any words stemming from it such as racism or racial disparity. The majority (89%) of statements omitted equity from their purpose, failing to describe how IR can serve to improve equitable outcomes. Our work prompts the field of IR to be more race-conscious and equity-minded in the ways they articulate their role and function in higher education.

Examining the Field of Institutional Research: Towards More Equitable Practices

Institutional Research (IR) offices are critical to the function of higher education. They serve as a central hub for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data related to student outcomes and institutional effectiveness. In recent years, scholars have called for IR offices to expand their role from being stewards of data to actively involved in identifying and addressing inequities on campus (Hernández et al., 2018). This expanded role in advance equity is critical as policymakers have invested in new reforms (i.e., restructuring remedial education) and initiatives (i.e., developing graduation improvement plans) to improve student success, enhancing equity, and become more justice-oriented institutions. As these policies are implemented, IR offices are key to helping institutions develop baseline conditions and understand the progress and improvements made to close equity gaps (McArthur, 2016).

This proposal shares research surveying the field of institutional research in the community college context. Using critical discourse analysis, we examined all 115 community colleges in California to understand how they articulate their purpose and role played to advance racial inequity on campus. Guiding research questions for this study were:

- In what ways do Institutional Research offices describe their role on campus?
- How do IR offices describe their role in addressing or advancing (racial) equity?

Background

Given the heightened attention to improving equity in community college, we see institutional research offices as key campus units to support and advance efforts seeking to address long-standing inequities. Assessing the function of IR offices, Terenzini (1993) noted that these academic departments are key to strategic planning, providing information to decision-makers related to institutional effectiveness and offering "evidence of weaknesses or flaws which

interfere with the attainment of the [institution's] purpose" (pg. 2). These offices have long been seen as the department responsible for collecting, interpreting, and sharing relevant data on all functions of the campus, especially on student outcomes and institutional effectiveness. When surveying IR Offices, Zerquera et al (2018) found that participants were unable to identify or did not understand concepts related to social justice, equity, power, and privilege. Following this line of scholarship, we seek to explore how IR offices can serve as more than data warehouses or sites of statistical analyses. One of the critiques of IR is the focus on objectivity and simply reporting data without contributing efforts towards ameliorating or dismantling the inequities identified (Franco & Hernández, 2018). Abrica and Rivas (2017) highlighted how IR tends to operate in color-evasive ways (lacking a focus on racial disparities), remaining neutral, and allow for the data to speak for itself, which tends to reinforce structural inequities on campus.

Towards More Justice-Oriented Institutional Research

IR offices are stewards of data, as an organizational unit they have the opportunity to leverage data collection to understand if marginalized groups are included as full participants on campus (Hernández et al., 2018). These offices and their integral role in higher education offers an opportunity to diminish silos across institutions and brings forth the opportunities for working "synergistically across campus divisions" to benefit the institution and their students (Jankowski & Marshall, 2017, p. 154). The reality for the field of institutional research is that it sorely lacks racial data literacy and the engagement with inquiry approaches that best serve increasingly diverse student populations, and the barriers faced on and around campus (Abrica, 2018).

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Theoretical Framework

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We use Critical Race Discourse Analysis (CRDA), as both a guiding theoretical framework and methodology (Briscoe & Muhammad, 2015; Carter et al., 2019). As a

framework, CRDA is used to examine the (in)visible discourse of race and racism in educational policies, namely within school discipline (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Van Dijk, 1993) and institutional diversity statements (Brown & Klein, 2020; Hypolite & Stewart, 2019; Iverson, 2007). Drawing on Critical Race Theory (Bell, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016), CRDA centers racialized discourse --the language, logic, and ideologies-- inherent in policies, statements, and texts created by educational institutions (Deeb-Sossa & Manzo, 2020). CRDA is not just about analyzing words, but understanding their weight and the impact on communities of color in education, requiring researchers to interrogate discourse and its racial implications. As a methodology, CRDA is used to examine both the racialized discourse of text as well as the underlying ideologies that inform what institutional research offices' do in higher education. Specifically, we use CRDA to explore if IR statements articulate a focus on race or need to identify and racial disparities in community college. By studying the discourse within official IR mission statements and overviews, we get a more comprehensive understanding of the function of these offices and the role they play, or do not, in advancing racial equity on campus.

Methods

We conducted a discursive analysis of mission statements describing the function of IR offices across 115 community colleges in the state (Iverson, 2007). The purpose was to examine the role of IR offices in promoting equity and addressing challenges faced by racialized students. To collect this data, in spring 2020, we searched institutional websites to identify the IR overview and mission statements. To ensure accuracy, multiple team members reviewed the collected data and verified that the appropriate text was captured. By gathering these IR statements, we were able to assess what, if any, efforts were being made to advance racial equity.

Our analysis proceeded in four stages. First, we developed a protocol guided by our theoretical framework that highlighted the racial discourse woven into IR statements. This discursive approach allowed us to place the focus on language and written text that are infused with meanings and values (Young & Diem, 2017). Specifically, if these statements include topics such as race, racial disparities, student equity, and how IR offices attempt to address racial equity. We tested the protocol for several rounds until a refined version of the tool was appropriate for examining all IR statements. Second, we conducted an independent analysis of sample statements and came together as a team to standardize the review process based on these pilot efforts. Third, each author examined a set of IR statements and wrote analytic memos on emerging patterns and themes. Lastly, the we aggregated the analysis to report descriptive statistics as well as generate the findings presented in our results section. What we share below are the preliminary results from 28 community colleges, a quarter of the full project.

Findings

We set out to explore the ways IR offices framed their purpose within community college, especially *if* and *how* they described taking a role in addressing racial equity. In sharing our results, we begin with a descriptive summary of the IR statements examined (Table 1), then highlight the articulated function and purpose of IR offices, and conclude with the (in)visible racial discourse in the mission statements of community college institutional research offices.

[Table 1]

Summarizing our Discursive Results

Our study captured how each IR Office: a) articulated its function on campus, b) focused on equity, and c) mentioned student success in their purpose. We created three categories to describe the function of IR: 64% were found to be passive (i.e., maintain, sustain), 18% were labeled as collaborative (i.e., assist, facilitate), and 18% as advancing (i.e., improve, strive)

institutional efforts for improving student outcomes. When exploring the discourse around equity, the majority (86%) did not mention the word itself. Only four mentioned equity: two described equity as a process to understand and two as a result to achieve. None of the statements in our sample included the word race or any words stemming from it such as racism or racial disparity (Table 2). Lastly, we assessed if the statements were student-centered and we found a near split between 13 (46%) campuses explicitly describing their role in improving student learning and success, and 15 (54%) having no mention of students at all.

[Table 2]

Institutional Research Function and Role

We categorized the majority of IR offices as **passive** in their role related to improving racial equity. Common descriptor words under this category were "maintains," "provides," and "reports." Passive IR offices stated their purpose as generating data and handing it off to decision-makers, limiting their role in the process of advancing equity. For example, Cerritos College shared, "It is our pleasure to provide institutional data, research, evaluation, and support for college planning and decision-making." Many within this category shared that their primary function was to generate data and deliver to others that made decisions.

The second set of IR statements were found to be **collaborative** as they described themselves as facilitating, integrating, and assisting campus departments with planning, evaluating, and supporting any other research goals. For example, East LA College stated, "Our office seeks to fulfill the President's commitment to include all campus constituencies and the community in planning the college's future and to utilize research findings as the basis for the college's evidence-driven planning model." IR offices in this category functioned as the wheel hub seeking to be connected with every spoke on campus to achieve their institutions' mission.

The final category, **advancing**, described IR offices that took an active role in achieving the institution's mission and improving student outcomes. Barstow College exemplified this descriptor type, stating "College planning does not rest in a series of documents, but rather in specific actions, directions, and processes that foster student learning and pursue institutional excellence" as well as "A critical outcome for the department efforts is to carve out time to address big questions from multiple angles, developing a community of knowledge that leads to increased organizational learning." Colleges found to be in advancing roles use data as a catalyst for conversations and action on campus to improve student learning and success.

Racial Equity Discourse

When considering the racial discourse in these mission statements, the results suggest that IR offices do not actively engage in addressing issues of racial equity. No campus was found to address institutional racism or racial disparities through institutional research. Similarly, 86% of IR offices did not mention equity when describing their role and function. We found limited discourse around equity, only four IR offices amongst the 28 community colleges included the word equity in describing their role and function. Two described equity as a process, seeking to use research as a means to further understand issues of inequity on campus. Citrus College stated, "equity, success, persistence, and completion of educational goals require proper identification of outcomes and data to hone in on targets for improvement." The other two included equity as a result to achieve, for example, one articulated they "provide leadership in research and assessment in order to carry out a rigorous institutional effectiveness agenda that focuses on student equity, success, and achievement." When describing equity, one set of IR offices described the need to "identify equity" while the other two sought to actively "achieve

equity" through institutional effectiveness. Furthermore, there was no delineation of how the four campuses planned to achieve equity as mentioned in their mission statements.

Significance

Our study illuminated the described purpose of IR offices and how they frame their role in addressing racial equity in community college. These findings are critical as IR offices serve a central role in understanding and identifying inequities in higher education through the collection and analysis of data as well as providing recommendations for how campus leaders should move forward. The lack of racial discourse in our results mirror Abrica and Rivas' (2017) assertion that "equity and advocacy for racial[ly] minori[tized] students are not routinely part of IR work" (p.44). Torres et al. (2018) argue that "community colleges may mistake access to education as equity" and fail to conduct analyses on the differential experiences of specific groups like racially minoritized students and the success they (don't) experience (p. 79). Our assessment of community college IR statements seeks to push these units from simply collecting, analyzing, and reporting data to meaningfully engaging and collaborate across campus to identify root-causes of inequity and propose equity-minded strategies that can make a difference for students.

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Tables

Table 1.

Categorizing the Role of Institutional Research Offices

Descriptor Type	Count	Percentage
Articulated Role on Campus		
Advancing	5	18%
Collaborative	5	18%
Passive	18	64%
Total	28	100%
Equity-Focused		
Equity Not Mentioned	24	86%
Equity as a Process	2	7%
Equity as a Result	2	7%
Total	28	100%
Student-Centered		
Yes	13	46%
No	15	54%
Total	28	100%

Table 2.

Characteristics of Community Colleges in Sample

Community College	Office Name	Mentioned Equity	Mentioned Race	Mentioned Students
Allan Hancock College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness (IE)			
American River College	Office of Institutional Research			
Antelope Valley College	Department of Institutional Effectiveness, Research and Planning			
Bakersfield College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness	X		X
Barstow College	Office of Institutional Research			X
Berkeley City College	Office of Institutional Research			X
Butte College	Planning, Budgeting, And Assessment (PBA)			
Cabrillo College	Planning and Research Office			X
Canada College	Office of Planning, Research and Institutional Effectiveness (PRIE)			X
Cerritos College	Institutional Effectiveness, Research and Planning (IERP)			X
Cerro Coso Community College	Office of Institutional Research			X
Chabot College	Office of Institutional Research (OIR)	X		X
Chaffey College	Office of Institutional Research			X
Citrus College	Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE)	X		X
City College of San Francisco	Office of Research and Planning			
Clovis Community College	Institutional Research	X		X
Coastline Community College	The Coastline Department of Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness			X
Diablo Valley College	Research, Planning, and Evaluation Committee (RPEC)			
East LA College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Advancement (OIEA)			X
El Camino College	Office of Institutional Research and Planning (IRP)			X
Evergreen Valley College	Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness (RPIE)			X
Hartnell College	Institutional Research Office			
Imperial Valley College	Office of Institutional Research			X
Irvine Valley College	Office of Research, Planning, and Accreditation			X
Taft College	Institutional Assessment, Research & Planning			X
Ventura College	Institutional Effectiveness			
Victor Valley College	Office of Institutional Research			
West Hills College Coalinga	Office of Accreditation, Research, Institutional Effectiveness, and Planning			