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First-Generation Equity Practitioners: *Are They Part of the Problem?*

By Estela Mara Bensimon and James Gray



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Let's begin with the core issue: Higher education professionals are generally racially illiterate.

This may sound like a damning statement for education as we enter 2020, but it's also important to note that things *are* getting better. This racial illiteracy is becoming more recognized as a characteristic of the profession that causes harm, even as professional norms, values, and beliefs make it hard for faculty and others to accept that it exists. According to Winans (2010), "Racial literacy entails critically examining and continually questioning how race and racism informs beliefs, interpretive frameworks, practices, cultures, and institutions" (p. 477).

As anyone who has engaged in it can tell you, raising race questions, engaging in anti-racism, and learning to be race-conscious is not something

In Short

- In order to teach Black, Latinx, Native American, Asian, and other racially minoritized students with fidelity, professors must develop racial literacy.
- Hiring practices adversely affect the ability to teach Black, Latinx, Native American, Asian, and other racially minoritized students.
- Professors developing a critical race conscious lens provide the opportunity to address racial inequities within their classes.
- First-generation equity practitioners who acquire effective equity-minded competence seem to all share certain qualities.

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higher education faculty and professionals have been taught (Harper, 2015). And it does not help to ignore it or pretend it's not there. *Racialization exists*; in the broadest terms, it describes patterns of racial advantage and disadvantage evident in higher education data, experiences, and opportunities. In the context of this article, we are using the term racialization to make the point that racist outcomes are produced through and by the habitual practices of faculty and others who we will describe as “first-generation equity practitioners.”

The terms “first-generation,” “at-risk,” and “underprepared” as applied to students have become ubiquitous labels in education, short-hand code language often used to justify inequality in higher education outcomes. Despite these terms lacking any semblance of rigor, there remains a common belief in the accuracy of these labels, allowing the labels themselves to exert power over oppressed groups by squarely placing the blame for a lack of success away from the professionals and onto the students.

Therefore, we appropriate “first-generation,” lifting it off students and applying it to faculty to call attention to their racial illiteracy and its detrimental consequences on their ability to educate minoritized students fairly, equitably, successfully, and with fidelity. For many, this label suggests that students struggle because they cannot ask their parents how to navigate systems of higher education, and perhaps do not even know what questions to ask. Is this any different

for the professoriate, which is 75% White, as they navigate issues of race and who are socialized to simultaneously deny the meaning of race while drawing on racist stereotypes to explain racial inequities (Bartoli et al., 2016)?

Let's put those assumptions and stereotypes about students and their families to rest. Our stance is, instead, that the great majority of faculty, including ourselves, have been or still are first-generation equity practitioners, and they need to learn what it means to be anti-racist in thought and action.

For two decades, the Center for Urban Education (CUE; of which Estela is the founding director and James is a senior affiliate) has concentrated on creating inquiry tools to engage practitioners in the study of their own practices from a critical race perspective. We have created structured learning settings for teams of first-generation equity practitioners to have a first conversation about the classroom as a racialized space by engaging in a structured examination of their teaching artifacts (such as syllabi), structures (such as the classroom), routines (such as pedagogical practices and office hours), and processes (such as hiring).

The goal is that these practitioners will realize that these taken-for-granted, ostensibly race-neutral practices represent the institutionalization of Whiteness. This type of structured inquiry into racialization is the method we have found to be most effective in supporting first-generation equity practitioners to develop critical race consciousness.

Openness to race-focused inquiry is most likely among practitioners who have the desire to do the “good” for their students (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015), as opposed to those who have a fragile professional identity and cannot believe they could be part of the problem.

To illustrate the process by which first-generation equity practitioners have learned to be more critically race conscious about their identity and to be more cognizant of racialization as a process inherent in their pedagogy, relationships with students, and in departmental and institutional practices, here are some examples from our work, focused on everyday practitioners that have participated in CUE initiatives.

FIRST-TIME EQUITY PRACTITIONER: AWARENESS OF RACIALIZATION IN FACULTY HIRING

In 2013, the Community College of Aurora (CCA) adopted CUE’s Equity Scorecard, and James was appointed as one of the leaders of the team assigned to work with CUE. One of his first activities was to examine data by race and ethnicity in math courses where he saw for the first time that the difference between success rates of racially minoritized students and Whites was as high as 35 percentage points.

As a first-generation equity practitioner, there was nothing in his knowledge or experiences that caused him to ask questions about the pervasiveness of racism. Instead, questions pathologizing minoritized students were asked as the conversation quickly turned to a fear that the only solution was to “lower standards,” another phrase that lacks rigor yet is powerful enough to protect faculty from examining their own practices and biases.

The disaggregation of data, however, also revealed that there were a small number of faculty for whom racially minoritized students were the highest performers in their classes. This seeming incongruity, which was really a belief disrupted by a fact, led James and his colleagues to study faculty. This ultimately led to small but impactful changes, such as changes to language in syllabi and classroom routines, as well as large changes, such as acknowledging that the faculty held the specious and racist belief that racially

minoritized students are not as capable as White students.

This change in beliefs ultimately led to changes in who was hired to teach math at CCA. As part of CUE’s Equity Scorecard, James realized that in the 10-year period he had been chair, he had never hired a college algebra instructor who was African American—an outcome that would have been virtually impossible if, in fact, race did not matter. He was forced to struggle with the reality that although this had not been his intention, he had accomplished the exact same result as a racist who had actively and intentionally worked to never hire an African American.

Upon the suggestion of Debbie Hanson, CUE senior project specialist, James reviewed the hiring searches of all full-time faculty as well as all of the résumés he had received for those seeking part-time instructor positions. There was a pattern. James’ preference for applicants who were “experienced” within the Colorado Community College System virtually guaranteed the pool of applicants would be White, a fact that became stunningly clear when he walked into a meeting of some 200 math faculty from across Colorado in which not a single African American was present. This also prompted changes in the interview process, such as describing the department’s racial equity goals to candidates and asking, “How do you see yourself contributing?” Asking this question had the power to provide a more critical view of candidates once considered highly desirable as well as those once considered unqualified.

Similarly, Dr. Leanne Nielsen, the provost at California Lutheran University, a Hispanic Serving Institution, wished to increase the number of faculty appointments from racial minoritized groups, and she engaged CUE to assist her and a team of faculty members in examining their hiring practices. Accepting her own White identity as a blinder to the realities of minoritized faculty, she came to see that, because of a “culture of niceness,” she had not challenged faculty search committees on their recommendations (typically White candidates). She resolved to bring about changes. The results of faculty searches as well as the appointments of academic leaders have become less White and more representative of her student body.

“In CUE’s more than 20 years of working with colleges and universities, one thing has become abundantly clear; first-generation equity practitioners who acquire effective equity-minded competence seem to all share certain qualities...They learn to analyze racial inequity as a symptom of institutional and practitioner malperformance.

FIRST-GENERATION EQUITY PRACTITIONER: RACIALIZED OUTCOMES IN MATHEMATICS

Another example of a first-generation equity-minded practitioner is Jason Burke—associate professor of Mathematics at the Community College of Denver. He was aware that the overall success rate in his algebra course was somewhere between 60 and 65%, which matched the department’s average success rate. It was not until he became involved in CUE’s Math Equity Project, however, that he saw the data for his courses disaggregated by race and ethnicity. He was shocked to learn that his White students had an 80% success rate, while for Latinx the success rate was just 33%.

A compelling clue was revealed when he engaged in an activity with the “Gradebook Race-Conscious Mapping” CUE tool that substitutes students’ names with their race and ethnic identity and, through a variety of symbols, codes their attendance, homework completion, and performance on quizzes and examinations.

Jason learned that Latinx students had perfect attendance but were not submitting their homework. When students miss homework assignments, it commonly leads to narratives that label students as not caring or underprepared, and so on. These narratives can lead to faculty exhorting students

to submit their homework, the creation of a policy that penalizes students, or simply ignoring the students altogether.

Rather than doing any of this, Jason recognized first that the students coming meant they cared. Second, as a first-generation equity professional, he had to be open to learning and changing his practices. He established a new routine: getting the homework started in class. He also became intentional about reaching out to Latinx students in his class to establish closer and more personal relationships with them. The changes he made in his mindset and in his pedagogical approaches impacted his performance and the performance of his Latinx students, whose success rates climbed from 33 to 85%.

CAN FACULTY FROM MINORITIZED GROUPS BE FIRST-GENERATION EQUITY PRACTITIONERS?

Both of the math examples above are drawn from CUE’s work with math faculty at Colorado’s community colleges. We selected two White males because they represent the majority of the professoriate, and their racial literacy is essential to addressing the unpaid debt higher education owes to minoritized populations.

But the question above about minoritized faculty also needs to be asked, and the answer is “YES.” While Black, Latinx, and Indigenous individuals can rarely evade their racial identity and manifestations of racism, they too have been socialized according to dominant academic norms and normative academic practices that can blind them to the racial consequences of their own practices.

As one example, Professor David Shih, a Chinese American professor at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire who had long been a strong advocate for diversity and taught courses that had a critical race focus, admitted that, prior to his involvement with CUE’s Equity Scorecard process, his pedagogy was more “exclusive” than he realized or desired. As a consequence, he “de-centered” himself so that he could “model” for students how to engage with race and racism critically.

So, what does it take to develop racial literacy in the context of higher education? In CUE’s more than 20 years of working with colleges and universities, one thing has become abundantly clear; first-generation equity practitioners who acquire effective equity-minded competence seem to all share certain qualities:

- They are not intimidated by nor do they reject the idea of Whiteness as a characteristic embedded in the practices of institutions of higher education and practitioners.

- They do not claim to “not see race,” and they do not insist that they treat everyone equally.
- They invest effort in educating themselves to be aware of how racialization operates in interactions, routines, and in ostensibly neutral choices.
- They advocate for responsible disaggregation of data by race and ethnicity, and they take precautions to establish conditions that will not lead to perverse outcomes.
- They can make a case for why racial equity has to be prioritized, particularly when there is a preference to focus on socioeconomic status.
- They do not accept “best practices” or “high impact practices” unconditionally because they understand that their deployment is vulnerable to Whiteness and can exacerbate racial inequity.

They learn to analyze racial inequity as a symptom of institutional and practitioner malperformance.

These are important characteristics to note, as they can help all of us more easily identify potential equity champions among our ranks.

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