

From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education

By Tia Brown McNair, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey Malcom-Piqueux
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Introduction

Eight minutes and forty-six seconds. On Monday, May 25, 2020, George Floyd was asphyxiated to death by Derek Chauvin, a Minneapolis police officer, as the world watched in dismay. The brutal ordeal lasted eight minutes and forty-six seconds and subsequently, jolted humanity into a social justice frenzy. In the days, weeks, months, and years to follow the tragic event, public institutions and private corporations have been called upon to enact systemic change to combat racial inequality. For institutions of higher education, like many other organizations, achieving equity requires faculty and staff to reckon with the institution's deep-seated history of whiteness and systemic racism embedded in its policies and practices. Sadly, interest groups and stakeholders advocating for substantive institutional equity were met with platitudes, diversity statements, and other symbolic gestures. Though not its focus, the book *From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education*, which was published in the same year, provides insight into why so many organizations were unable to answer the clarion call for social equity in response to the murder of George Floyd (Williams and Duckett 2020). Public administration's extant literature offers countless examples of how organizations miss the mark of achieving social equity. In this book, Tia Brown McNair, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey Malcolm-Piqueux explicate how whiteness, privilege, and systemic racism operate at various levels within the academy, and clear a path toward equity-mindedness and engaged inclusivity.

Summary of Argument

The book's central argument is that equity necessitates critical inquiry as to why inequities exist. It implores readers to first ask *why inequities exist* before considering *how to close equity gaps*. McNair, Bensimon, and Malcolm-Piqueux (2020) postulate, "the ways in which problems are framed influence the solutions that practitioners can envision" (104) and throughout the book they illustrate the ways in which "racism and a pervasive belief in hierarchy of human values have shaped [higher education] systems, policies, and practices" (6). These authors find, "the whiteness question is not asked because racial equity is not considered a standard of quality, performance or accountability" for many institutions (106).

Summary of Contents

The book opens with guided self-reflection to ascertain the reader's current understanding of equity, followed by broad coverage of the conceptual and linguistic parameters of equity. Upon establishing a shared understanding of equity, the body of the text shifts its focus to "how institutions can examine their data and practices through equity lenses, how they define equity and equity-mindedness, and what that means for campus change" (McNair, Bensimon, and Malcolm-Piqueux 2020, 18). Each chapter offers strategies and best practices for equity-mindedness based on scenarios and cases studies of AAC&U institutional members in consultation with CUE. The book deconstructs commonly used performance indicators and other higher education metrics, provides guidance on how best to disaggregate and communicate performance measures

to promote engaged inclusivity, discusses common obstacles to creating an equity-minded campus culture, and offers strategies for building capacity for equity-mindedness.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The book's greatest strength is its accessible framework for thinking about why inequities exist and how to close equity gaps. The equity-mindedness framework is an evidenced-based approach for identifying and overcoming obstacles in implementing equity as a "*pervasive institutional value*" within higher education organizations. The book caters to varying levels of expertise. In addition to the guided self-reflection at the beginning of the book, the last chapter sets forth strategies specifically designed for first-generation equity practitioners.

An asset of this text is its firm grounding in higher education practice; this may also be its weakness. The authors take much care to speak to the context and needs of the target audience, which may be unappealing to non-higher education professionals. Yes, the higher education environment has unique characteristics; however, the equity-mindedness framework has value in non-higher education spaces. For instance, data scientists and technicians working in any organization can benefit from using community data as a tool to advance equity, which is the focus of chapter 3, just as leaders and managers working in large organizations can learn valuable strategies from chapter 4's emphasis on aligning strategic priorities and building institutional capacity.

Conclusion

Dwight Waldo argued that "the elimination of extreme inequality" is akin to the essence of public administration (Miller 2012, 63) and, some 133 years after Woodrow Wilson (1887) declared "the studious and systematic adjustment of administrative tasks resulting in carefully tested standards of policy" (200) as the province of public administration scholarship, Black and Brown bodies are being crushed and destroyed under the weight of systemic racism. The death of George Floyd was a moment in modern history that reinvig-

rated movements for social change and human rights while, concurrently, exposing organizational and societal shortfalls to achieving racial justice. This book offers its readers a deep dive into organizational culture and equity in higher education institutions; it also provides an evidenced-based model for moving from symbolic to material equity. It guides readers toward aligning organizational beliefs and values with actions to achieve excellence in equity through accountability, assessment, and reflection.

About the Authors

Considering the status of racial equity in higher education is a task well-suited for these authors. Having published several books and numerous other publications both collectively and individually, Drs. McNair, Bensimon, and Malcolm-Piquex have extensive knowledge of racial and gender equity, student success, high-impact educational practices, strategy implementation, and change in higher education. Dr. Tia McNair holds several professional positions and appointments building on her expertise in student success and high-impact educational practices. Dr. McNair provides strategic direction and leadership for AAC&U's Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Campus Centers as well as the Summer Institute for High Impact Educational Practices. Dr. Estela Bensimon is an elected fellow of the National Academy of Education and Dean's Professor of Educational Equity at the University of Southern California. There she founded and leads the Center for Urban Education (CUE) where she cultivates her practice in equity, organizational learning, and change. Dr. Lindsey Malcolm-Piquex is Assistant Vice President of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Assessment at the California Institute of Technology where she works to investigate and improve institutional conditions that advance equity. Through their work and partnership with USC's Center for Urban Education and the Association of American Colleges and Universities, Drs. McNair, Bensimon, and Malcolm-Piquex use their decades of combined experiences and expertise to advise campuses across the nation on "designing and implementing effective campus change strategies that establish more expansive and equity-minded campus cultures" (2020).

References

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