Preserving Equity in Tough Times

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Table of Contents

I. The Center for Urban Education’s Mission 3
II. Letter to WICHE Commissioners 4
III. Equity Policy and Research Analysis: a CUE and WICHE Partnership 5
IV. CUE Partners and Partnerships 6
V. Equity in Higher Education 7
VI. The CUE Equity Model 8
VII. The Vital Signs 10
VIII. The Vital Signs Perspectives 11-12
IX. Benchmarking Equity and Student Success Tool (BESST) 13
X. The Equity Scorecard 15
XI. Finding Solutions 16
The Center for Urban Education (CUE) conducts socially conscious research and develops tools needed for institutions of higher education to produce equity in student outcomes.

Established at the University of Southern California in 1999 as part of the University’s urban initiative, the Center for Urban Education (CUE) leads socially conscious research and develops tools needed for institutions of higher education to produce equity in student outcomes. CUE’s research team pioneered a multi-disciplined inquiry approach, the CUE Equity Model, that is helping higher education institutions across the country become more accountable to students from under-served racial and ethnic communities. The Center is co-directed by Estela Mara Bensimon, professor of higher education, and Alicia C. Dowd, associate professor of higher education, both of USC’s Rossier School of Education.
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WICHE Commissioners,  

As you know legislators, governing boards, and accrediting agencies are all anxious to see improvements in postsecondary systems’ effectiveness in educating and graduating students. The mantra to achieve college completion goals is “data-driven decision-making.” Based on our experience working with systems and institutions over the past decade, we have observed how difficult it is to act on data in concrete ways to address the seemingly intractable challenge of inequity in educational outcomes.  

In Protecting Our Priorities: the 2010 WICHE Workplan, you have articulated priorities and goals that closely align with the Center for Urban Education’s mission. As part of our mission to enable systems and institutions to achieve equity and student success goals, we pioneered the CUE Equity Model. We provide the data and inquiry tools that make the process of using data to achieve equity real, manageable, and attainable. Our Equity Model tools enable systems to gain a nuanced understanding of the barriers affecting success for students of color, and to set long- and short-term goals for improvement tied to their strategic priorities. Our collaborative approach taps into the existing expertise of administrators, policymakers, faculty, and staff. It enables them to ask fresh questions, probe into why the data looks the way it does, and adopt specific benchmarks for improvement. The CUE Equity Model has been used by systems and institutions to improve effectiveness in, among other areas, degree attainment, developmental education, transfer, and STEM education.  

Based on our experience and expertise, CUE is uniquely positioned to assist WICHE states in meeting strategic goals in the areas of access and success. We invite you to review our data and inquiry tools and to discuss with us how we can help your system achieve its college completion goals.  

Yours Sincerely,  

Estela Mara Bensimon  
Alicia C. Dowd
**Equity Policy Research and Analysis: A CUE and WICHE Partnership**

The Center for Urban Education (CUE) and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) have formed a partnership to assist WICHE member states in achieving college completion goals. The two-year project, funded by the Ford Foundation, is intended to strengthen the capacity of both organizations to advocate for equity in states’ access and success policies and initiatives.

The Center for Urban Education, at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, conducts socially conscious research focused on issues of equity. Seeing the need for tools that allow institutions to understand and act on data, CUE developed the CUE Equity Model, which has been used by states and institutions to develop system- and campus-level changes to policy and practice. The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education is a regional, interstate compact created by formal legislative action of the states and the U.S. Congress. WICHE was created to facilitate resource sharing among the higher education systems of the fifteen member states. The Policy Analysis and Research unit of WICHE provides legislators and decision makers with information to make informed decisions.

Together CUE and WICHE will advocate for racial equity issues while working directly with WICHE states and developing an affiliate training program.

**WICHE States**
Nevada, a WICHE member state, is collaborating with CUE and WICHE to utilize their combined expertise. Nevada will be utilizing elements of CUE’s Equity model, in particular the Benchmarking Equity and Student Success Tool (BESST). The BESST makes data real and actionable for practitioners. It allows them to interact with the data in order to identify intervention zones, resulting in data-based decision making. A key step in the process is to look at student data disaggregated by race and ethnicity, because closing the gap for underrepresented populations is essential to meeting attainment goals. Some of the questions the BESST addresses are: “Who’s getting degrees? What degrees? Where are we losing students in the pipeline? What can we do as a system to help support college completion?”

**Policy Affiliates**
Dr. Brian Pusser, an associate professor of higher education and director of the Center for the Study of Higher Education in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia, will direct seminars to educate policy professionals in the methods of critical policy analysis. Introducing the methods of critical policy analysis is essential to long-term efforts to address equality in higher education.

The CUE and WICHE partnership is a first step in developing connected resources for higher education. Ongoing budget cuts, low college completion rates and changing student demographics mean that states, particularly those in the West, need to become highly effective with limited resources in order to meet national goals of improved postsecondary education attainment rates.
From 2001-2010, over 40 four- and two-year institutions have used CUE Equity Model tools and processes.

California State University - Chico
California State University - Dominguez Hills
California State University - Fullerton
California State University - Los Angeles
Cerritos College
College of Alameda
DeAnza College
Fort Lewis College
Fox Valley Technical College
Hartnell College
Long Beach City College
Los Angeles City College
Los Medanos College
Los Angeles Southwest College
Los Angeles Valley Community College
Loyola Marymount University
Madison Area Technical College
Merritt College
Metropolitan State College of Denver
Milwaukee Area Technical College
Mount San Antonio College
Mount Saint Mary’s College
Occidental College
Rio Hondo College
Riverside Community College
San Jose/Evergreen Community College Dist.
San Joaquin Delta College
Santa Monica College
Trinity College
University of La Verne
University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire
University of Wisconsin - La Crosse
University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee
University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh
University of Wisconsin - Parkside
University of Wisconsin - Platteville
University of Wisconsin - River Falls
University of Wisconsin - Stout
University of Wisconsin - Superior
University of Wisconsin - Whitewater
University of Wisconsin - Colleges
University of Redlands
Washington State University
Whittier College
Vassar College
“We seek not just freedom but opportunity. We seek not just legal equity but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result.”

-Lyndon B. Johnson

**Equity in Higher Education**

The phrase “equity in higher education” refers to creating opportunities for equal access and success in higher education among historically underrepresented student populations, such as ethnic minority and low-income students. Within the postsecondary education community, “equity” is further defined by: (1) **representational equity**, or the proportional participation of historically underrepresented student populations at all levels of an institution; (2) **resource equity**, which accounts for how educational resources are distributed to close equity gaps; and (3) **equity mindedness**, which involves institutional leaders and staff demonstrating an awareness and willingness to address equity issues.

**Accountability for Equity**

Inequality in higher education is felt most acutely by African American, Latino, Latina, Southeast Asian, and American Indian students and is detrimental to everyone. It negatively affects the entire nation in such matters as unemployment, welfare costs, voter turnout, income levels, and healthcare. Additionally, inequities jeopardize our nation’s ability to produce the degrees that secure our position in a global economy. For these reasons, accountability in higher education must be about equity in outcomes among racial-ethnic groups as well as about institutional effectiveness. The indicators of the CUE Equity Model help prioritize and call attention to equity issues to generate support from policymakers, college leaders, faculty, counselors and other higher education stakeholders.
“Everyone talks about data-driven decision-making. CUE is successful at using data with colleges and systems to change the way we do business.”

David Longanecker
President, WICHE

The CUE Equity Model

The CUE Equity Model consists of a complete cycle of action inquiry involving identification of gaps in educational outcomes, inquiry into instructional and academic support practices, purposeful changes in practices based on the results of systematic inquiry, and evaluation of the effectiveness of changes.

The tools and processes of the CUE Equity Model:

• Break down an abstract college completion goal into specific rates of success that students must meet at key milestones along the educational pipeline;

• Identify at what point in the educational pipeline interventions are needed in order to increase completion rates by a specified percentage;

• Design systemic interventions based on relevant data;

• Engage faculty, administrators, and policymakers in a collaborative effort to improve system performance.
The CUE Equity Model consists of practical tools for fine-grained data analyses, such as the Vital Signs, the Equity Scorecard, and the Benchmarking Equity and Student Success Tool (BESSST); protocols for qualitative assessment of curriculum, programs, and learning outcomes; a training program on data practices based on principles of practitioner-driven action inquiry; an implementation model that provides continuous training and technical assistance from experienced facilitators; and an evaluation model to assess the impact of change.

CUE’s award-winning multi-disciplined approach and tools are helping educational institutions across the country move from a focus on diversity to accountability for equitable educational outcomes.
The Vital Signs

The Vital Signs are a framework for institutional self-assessment and serve as the starting point when investigating system or college data using the CUE Equity Model.

The Vital Signs provide four perspectives on institutional performance with respect to equity in educational outcomes: (1) Access, (2) Completion and Excellence, (3) Campus Effort, and (4) Retention. Each perspective has several indicators, selected to represent key points of student progression in the curriculum.

The Vital Signs, illustrated here for the Completion and Excellence perspective, provide a snapshot of “baseline,” or current performance, data.

| TABLE ONE: Degree completion within 150% time |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|                  | Asian American  | African American| Native American | White           | Filipino        | Latino/a        | Other/ Unknown  |
| Fall 2004        | 268             | 82              | 36              | 423             | 159            | 387             | 32              |
|                  | 19%             | 6%              | 3%              | 30%             | 11%            | 28%             | 2%              |
| Fall 2005        | 274             | 84              | 34              | 467             | 167            | 365             | 13              |
|                  | 20%             | 6%              | 2%              | 33%             | 12%            | 26%             | 1%              |
| Fall 2006        | 259             | 95              | 31              | 454             | 187            | 333             | 35              |
|                  | 19%             | 7%              | 2%              | 33%             | 13%            | 24%             | 3%              |
| Fall 2007        | 245             | 98              | 28              | 413             | 165            | 345             | 37              |
|                  | 18%             | 7%              | 2%              | 31%             | 12%            | 26%             | 3%              |
| Fall 2008        | 249             | 86              | 36              | 407             | 186            | 314             | 56              |
|                  | 19%             | 6%              | 3%              | 31%             | 14%            | 24%             | 4%              |
| Fall 2009        | 221             | 79              | 39              | 434             | 152            | 312             | 57              |
|                  | 17%             | 6%              | 3%              | 34%             | 12%            | 24%             | 4%              |

Rationale: 1) To understand how student completion trends have changed over time. 2) To understand which student groups are experiencing greater or lesser completion.

Guiding Questions: 1) Is student group completion increasing, decreasing, or remaining the same between 2004 and 2009? 2) How do these changes compare to the student populations entering the institution? (See ACCESS Vital Signs)
These data allow faculty members, counselors, administrators, and others to see where inequities are occurring. They draw attention to where policy makers and educators must intervene to produce equity in educational outcomes for underserved populations.

**Sample Vital Signs Indicators**

*The Access Perspective*

- Total enrollment by race, ethnicity, gender, and full-time or part-time status
- New student enrollment trends
- Admission and matriculation data for four-year institutions
- First-time student placement into remedial courses for two- and four-year institutions.

![Vital Signs template for the Access Perspective](image-url)
Sample Vital Signs Indicators (continued)

The Completion and Excellence Perspective

- Degree completion and/or transfer readiness
- The GPAs of graduating and/or transferring students
- Degree attainment in particular disciplines, like science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)
- Student applications for graduate and professional school

The Campus Effort Perspective

- Student participation in key extracurricular programs
- Hiring patterns for faculty, staff, and administration
- The number and types of courses taught by tenured and adjunct faculty
- Professional development resources and opportunities
- Availability and access to academic resources
- The distribution of merit based scholarships

The Retention Perspective

- Term-to-term retention and cohort migration in remediation, transfer from two- to four-year institutions, or Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields.
- Year-to-year retention and cohort migration in remediation, transfer from two- to four-year institutions, or science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields.
The Benchmarking Equity and Student Success Tool

We developed the Benchmarking Equity and Student Success Tool (BESST) to make college completion goals real and actionable for higher education systems. It is designed to keep “eyes on the prize” by first setting high goals for equity and student success. These goals then become actionable when teams of stakeholders set performance benchmarks at specific intervention points, which they agree to improve and monitor continuously. The BESST:

- Breaks down an abstract college completion goal into specific rates of success that students must meet at key milestones along the educational pipeline.
- Pinpoints trouble spots along the educational pipeline to develop appropriate interventions.
- Tracks outcomes for a cohort of students through selected milestones to a completion outcome, such as graduation.
- Simplifies the calculation of rates of success by race and milestones.
- Makes it easier for busy leaders and educators to plan a focused inquiry into the factors affecting student success.
Using the BESST to visualize impact of targeted interventions on the baseline (current performance) to reach the goal

The BESST implementation process, with templates, guidelines, and support from CUE, has several steps that accommodate customization to reflect system or campus needs and contexts.

1. Identify targets of improvement;
2. Define the cohort(s) of students and the key milestones for longitudinal analysis;
3. Calculate current success rates disaggregated by race and ethnicity;
4. Determine the rates of success needed for each racial-ethnic group at each milestone to equitably achieve the state’s college completion goals;
5. Implement the data collection and analysis (inquiry) tools of the CUE Equity Model to improve outcomes in the targeted “intervention zone.”
The Equity Scorecard is the culmination of the inquiry process and captures the improvement and equity goals agreed upon by leaders and stakeholders. The Equity Scorecard provides the criteria for evaluating institutional effectiveness in closing educational gaps and increasing college completion.
“Under Bensimon’s leadership CUE has fostered research that has helped institutions of higher education across the country, including the University of Wisconsin, to become more accountable to students from underserved racial and ethnic communities. Eleven volunteer UW institutions are currently using CUE’s Equity Scorecard as a multi-disciplined process of sustained inquiry. They are using disaggregated data to identify more refined pathways and strategies for eliminating inequities in educational opportunities and outcomes.”

Kevin P. Reilly
President
University of Wisconsin System

**Finding Solutions**

The CUE Equity Model reframes low rates of college completion as a lack of institutional effectiveness in serving students. By focusing on what systems and institutions need to change, rather than how students need to change, is possible for higher education leaders to approach the challenge of inequity as a *solvable problem of professional practice*.

Participants involved in implementing the CUE Equity Model are actively engaged in finding solutions to practices adversely affecting student success that are grounded in their local context: they use their own data; investigate their own programs, practices, and policies; benchmark against their own strategic priorities; and develop interventions tailored to their own needs.
CUE’s collaborative approach enables systems and institutions to create the solutions most appropriate for their context, not pick a trendy practice or program off the shelf.

**Best Practitioners, Not Best Practices**

The CUE Equity Model draws from multiple disciplines and theoretical frameworks, but, at heart, is a model for professional development and organizational learning.

Adopters of the CUE Equity Model invest in their own capacity to create solutions best suited for local problem-solving. The CUE Equity Model's tools and methods have been unusually successful in engaging faculty members. As a result, its impact extends to the heart of the academic enterprise: academic departments and faculty members.

Our approach to getting a nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by students is transformative because it is grounded in improving professional practice throughout a system or institution. A best practice picked off the shelf might be expeditious, but may not actually work well in a new context. A best practitioner is prepared to promote student success in *any* context.

**Leadership Academy**

Successful facilitation of the CUE Equity Model requires expertise in several areas, including an understanding of cultural change, of practitioner and organizational learning, and of the characteristics of effective teams. In Fall 2010, CUE will inaugurate its Leadership Academy to provide professional development opportunities for leaders from our organizational partners.
Contact Information

CUE is available to assist systems and institutions seeking real solutions to improving student outcomes. For more information, please visit our website at http://cue.usc.edu.

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