Plenary Session IV: Preserving Equity in Tough Times

The first sentence of WICHE’s mission states that our organization’s reason for being is “to expand educational access and excellence for all citizens of the West.” This remains an unfinished agenda. While it is difficult to judge how well the West is doing on the excellence agenda because we don’t measure student learning in ways in which comparisons can be made, we have ample evidence that the equity/access agenda has yet to be adequately addressed. WICHE’s publication Beyond Social Justice details how young adults from underrepresented communities of color remain much less likely to receive a college education than their Anglo or Asian peers. Only 15 percent of 25- to 34-year-old Hispanic adults in the WICHE states, 16 percent of Native Americans, and 29 percent of African Americans have an associate or higher degree, compared to 45 percent of White adults and 63 percent of Asian adults in the same age range.

Not only do huge disparities in educational attainment persist in the West, these disparities will increase if we don’t improve our capacity to serve traditionally underrepresented populations. More than one-half of all the growth in the young adult population in the near future will be Hispanic, a population that today is only one-third as likely to complete college as their White peers. As Beyond Social Justice demonstrates, reducing these gaps is not only an equity imperative, it has also become an economic imperative.

But addressing the issue of equity becomes particularly challenging in difficult financial times. In most of the Western states, reducing the gaps in participation and success of students from different racial/ethnic groups will require expansion in enrollments: more students going on to college and higher rates of completion for those who do.

Two natural forces in American higher education make it difficult in tough times to absorb these new students and to do so successfully. First, public higher education in the West has relied greatly on increased state appropriations to fund increased participation and success. But the recent recession has eroded state budgets, and the absence of increased funding – indeed, the reduction of such funding in many states – makes it impossible to expand access and equity within the framework of our traditional way of doing business. Second, the natural incentive within institutions of higher education in an environment of scarce resources is to limit enrollment and increase selectivity, both of which weigh against addressing equity gaps.

But these natural forces need not drive public policy in tough times. Indeed, tough times provide an opportunity to rethink our business
model and to address equity gaps in new ways that hold great promise. Two national experts presenting to the commission in this plenary session are helping pave the way to greater understanding about how this can be done. Estela Bensimon is renowned for her work as codirector of the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at the University of Southern California and more specifically for her work in developing the Equity Scorecard, an evidence-based, applied research effort that helps institutions and states better understand how well they are doing in addressing equity issues, where specifically within the academic enterprise the barriers to success are occurring, and what strategies have succeeded in bringing down those barriers. WICHE has had the pleasure of working with Bensimon and her colleagues for some time and recently joined as a partner with the CUE on a grant from the Ford Foundation to broaden implementation of the Equity Scorecard at the state level within the West. Robert M. Shireman, deputy under secretary at the U.S. Department of Education, has worked with equity and financial aid issues for his entire career, which has included stints with the White House National Economic Council, Aspen Institute, and James Irvine Foundation, among other organizations, as well as the founding of the nonprofit Institute for College Access and Success, which focused on rising student debt and other critical issues.

Equity need not suffer in tough times. In fact, intentional policy and practice can help reverse past trends. But this won’t happen naturally. It will require smart, intentional action. Bensimon and Shireman will help the commission envision how WICHE might help bring together federal, state, and institutional efforts to move this agenda forward in the West.

Speakers: Estela Bensimon, codirector, Center for Urban Education, University of Southern California; Robert M. Shireman, deputy under secretary, U.S. Department of Education

Biographical Information on the Speakers

Estela Mara Bensimon is a professor of higher education and codirector of the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at the USC Rossier School of Education. Her current research is on issues of racial equity in higher education from the perspective of organizational learning and sociocultural practice theories. She is particularly interested in place-based, practitioner-driven inquiry as a means of organizational change in higher education. Bensimon’s publications about equity, organizational learning, practitioner inquiry and change include: “The Underestimated Significance of Practitioner Knowledge in the Scholarship on Student Success,” “Doing Research that Makes a Difference,” “Equality in Fact, Equality in Results: A Matter of Institutional Accountability,” and “Measuring the State of Equity in
Public Higher Education and Closing the Achievement Gap in Higher Education: An Organizational Learning Perspective.” Previously, Bensimon conducted research on leadership in higher education and is the author or coauthor of several publications on college presidents, department chairs, and administrative teams. Bensimon’s publications have appeared in *Change, Review of Higher Education, The Journal of Higher Education, Liberal Education*, and *Harvard Education Review*. She is the coauthor of *Redesigning Collegiate Leadership: Teams and Teamwork in Higher Education* (with Anna Neumann) and *Working with Junior Faculty: The Role of Department Chairs* (with K. Ward and K. Sanders).

Bensimon has held leadership positions in the Association for the Study of Higher Education (president, 2005-2006) and in the American Education Research Association’s Division on Postsecondary Education (vice president, 1992-1994). She has served on the boards of the American Association for Higher Education and the Association of American Colleges and Universities. Bensimon was associate dean of the USC Rossier School of Education from 1996-2000 and was a Fulbright Scholar to Mexico in 2002. She earned her doctorate in higher education from Teachers College, Columbia University.

**Robert M. Shireman** is the deputy under secretary at the U.S. Department of Education. The office of the under secretary oversees the agency’s efforts to help Americans pay for college; promotes innovation and improvement in adult, career-technical, and higher education; and supports student preparation and planning for education and training beyond high school. Shireman has played a leading role in the Obama Administration’s efforts to simplify the federal financial aid application process, strengthen program integrity and consumer protection, develop strategies to increase college completion, and improve the reliability and reach of federal grants, loans, and other college aid. Immediately before joining the Department of Education in 2009, Shireman was president of a California-based, nonprofit Institute for College Access and Success, which he built from the ground up. His organization brought public attention to the issue of rising student debt, prompting Congress to adopt income-based repayment for federal loans. Other projects included efforts to reduce waste in the federal student loan program; improve the effectiveness of financial aid at California community colleges; assist colleges in their efforts to support pluralism and diversity on campus; enhance accountability through better use of higher education data; and improve financial aid application processes.

Before founding the institute, Shireman was a senior fellow at the Aspen Institute, where he convened national leaders of high school reform efforts and experts in higher education access for policy strategy.
discussions; facilitated state-level strategy sessions of education and business leaders; and helped manage a national coalition of 34 education organizations (Pathways to College Network), coauthoring the Shared Agenda action plan and developing the College Access Marketing toolkit. Prior to Aspen Shireman served as the program director for higher education at the James Irvine Foundation, managing a portfolio of new grants totaling up to $15 million annually and leading a team that worked with private colleges to assess their needs in terms of improving campus diversity, tailoring support to those needs and encouraging the use of data and evaluation to promote effective implementation of revised strategies. Shireman also developed new lines of support focused on college access and California public policy, leading to the creation of Education Trust-West and to an unprecedented summit of 50 California college presidents on the topic of teacher preparation.

In the 1990s Shireman worked for President Clinton for two years and before that for U.S. Senator Paul Simon (Illinois) for seven years. At the White House National Economic Council, Shireman led the effort to create the GEAR UP college preparation program and coordinated the America Reads campaign. In addition, he developed and successfully pursued a half-billion dollar federal investment plan to address the education needs of Hispanic families; coordinated interagency efforts to implement the new HOPE Scholarship and Lifetime Learning tax credits; and designed and promoted a plan for federal assistance for K-12 school construction and renovation. Shireman earned a bachelor’s degree in economics from the University of California at Berkeley and master’s degrees from the University of San Francisco (in public administration) and the Harvard Graduate School of Education (in education).