

Transcript - ASU Remote 2022: Toward Ending the Monolithic View of “Underrepresented Students” In U.S. Higher Education

6/9/2022

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NORMA HOLLEBEKE: Hello. And welcome to Remote, the Connected Faculty Summit. I'm Norma Hollebeke, Manager of Network Programs and Services with Every Learner Everywhere. And I will be moderating your session today. This 90 minute ask-the-experts block by Every Learner Everywhere, which is a nonprofit network that advocates for and supports institutions in achieving equitable outcomes in higher education through advances in digital learning. This final segment of our ask-the-expert focuses on addressing inequities in higher education.

ROBERT MCGUIRE: Hello. I hope everyone has been getting a lot out of the conference so far. I'm Robert McGuire. And I'm an Independent Contractor working with Every Learner Everywhere to develop the report I'm going to talk about today. My presentation is going to preview a work in progress that is tentatively titled, toward ending the monolithic view of underrepresented students, why higher education must account for racial, ethnic, and economic variations in barriers to equity.

The seed of this project started with the observation that we know-- to paraphrase Estela Bensimon-- that is a kind of educational malpractice to aggregate all underrepresented college and university students into one cohort. Students are not a monolith. That's self-evident. Nevertheless, so much discourse in higher ed and so many research studies and surveys still aggregate so-called underrepresented students into one big bucket.

So with this in mind, Every Learner Everywhere asked me to develop a report that asks the question, if we stop treating all minoritized and poverty affected students as a monolith, what would we discover? What does the disaggregated data show? And how does it matter in digital learning?

Some of you may be chuckling and can guess the first problem I'm going to run into, which I'll talk about in a couple of moments. Of course, data can be disaggregated by

many facets of identity. Every Learner Everywhere's mission is to support digital learning that closes equity gaps for students who are racially and ethnically minoritized, poverty affected, or first generation, so I was looking for data on those groups of students in particular.

The goal of the project is to advance intersectional and data informed conversations about equity and digital learning. We envisioned a literature review and a set of original interviews with experts, including students, educators, and researchers.

A little bit about some of the students I've talked to, they're from predominantly white institutions and from HBCUs. They're from community colleges and four year colleges. They've had multi-institutional trajectories. One student I talked to is in her 50s and has health issues that are a big part of the difficulties in their degree progress. One is a mother of three in her 30s who had used up her financial aid eligibility in a previous try at college 15 years earlier, and was now paying for college out of pocket.

One talked about the conflicts between her religious identity-- her religious practices and campus culture. And most of them shared how racial and ethnic prejudice or misunderstandings about race and ethnicity were compounded by other aspects of their identities. Most but by no means all of them feel acute financial pressures that make economic-- or excuse me, academic progress difficult.

We've completed the literature review and interviews and have drafted the report, and it's in the review stage now. And I hope it will be published in August. In addition to addressing that primary question, the report includes background and context on the fraught history of how these racial and ethnic categories are defined, and on how first generation is unhelpfully blurred with low income and racial categories, and on the unique ways HBCUs and tribal colleges and universities create equity centered learning. So let's look at that primary question. Do students of different races, ethnicities, and economic classes experience different barriers to equity in US colleges and universities? Do they experience the same barriers in unique ways? The first thing we discovered-- or, really, confirmed, since many of you will see this coming-- is that there was very little disaggregated data on this question.

The conversations about the need for disaggregated data to better understand particular student populations have been going on for a while, but there are a few broadly available data sources that do so. Too many still tend to compare either white

students to minority students or white students to Black, and then to other minority students.

And there are a couple of other challenges, at least as regards to the question we're interested in. One, there's even less about digital learning in particular. And two the data that does exist tends to be limited to the inputs and the outputs. That is to data about K-12 experiences, college readiness and enrollment on one end, and graduation rates and career outcomes on the other end.

There is less data about classroom practices and instructional design, and how these have an impact on the experience students have with equity. One source referred to this as the black box issue. Before I continue, I want to acknowledge that there isn't zero disaggregated data.

The most comprehensive publications we found that disaggregate student data on the populations of interest for this project, and that also includes several chapters of insightful commentary and analysis, is a pair of reports from ACE, the American Council on Education, titled Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education.

It was published originally in 2019, and was followed up in 2020 with a supplementary report. And it includes over 200 indicators on pre-college academic preparation, admissions, financial aid and borrowing, family income, degree completion, graduation rates and employment outcomes, as well as on faculty diversity.

The ACE reports are also unique in that they account for associate, certificate, bachelor's, graduate and professional programs, whereas most data and most commentary and analysis about higher education tends to center bachelor's degree programs.

And then there are excellent initiatives about particular student populations. AHEC AIMS is one. The American Indian Measures of Success, which is managed by the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, it works with tribal colleges and universities and other institutions with sizable Indigenous student populations to build up data that fills in this gap.

Another, along similar lines for Asian-American and Pacific Islander students, is the Southeast Asia Resource Center-- Southeast Asia Resource Action Center and the Institute for Higher Education Policy, which collaborated to publish Everyone Deserves to be Seen. And that's not a database as far as I know, but rather a review of the previous existing literature. And there's lots of great data in that report.

So, there's not zero data. There ought to be more. That's disaggregated. And it's like as I say, we've been doing these interviews for this project. So what would or what does more and better disaggregated information about students do for us? How would it actually help institutions to close opportunity gaps and to achieve equity?

Well, one, better disaggregated data would illuminate inter-group heterogeneity. For example, Latinx students have ancestry in more than 15 countries, and identify in several different racial categories. So it's an extremely heterogeneous group, with a lot of variation in educational achievement. For example, college enrollment ranges between 27% for Honduran students-- or students with Honduran ancestry, that is-- and 64% for Chilean students with a range of 27% to 64% is quite a significant range to describe a single group of students like Latinx.

Within Asian-American and Pacific Islanders, something similar could be observed. They do, on average, enroll in and complete college at higher rates than whites or other minoritized groups, but the college enrollment rate ranges between by 23% among the 25 different subpopulations that the US census recognizes. And the same can be-- similar things can be observed with different indicators like graduation rates and degree attainment and career outcomes.

So let's pause there and suppose that we had in mind some particular barriers to equity that a given campus was concerned about and was trying to mitigate. And some of them that came up in our research and under discussion with experts are things like academic readiness-- differences in academic readiness, that is, and differences in college going knowledge.

And I want to emphasize that those two are not the same thing. A lot of the discourse about so-called lack of academic readiness is really about college-going knowledge. It might be differences in how the weight of student debt affects students, it might be differences in digital access, it might be the cost of courseware. It might be that the institution has failed to provide role models among the faculty.

But by homogenizing all underrepresented students and even by homogenizing all black or all Asian-American or all Latinx or all Indigenous or all first generation students, we are overlooking very significant differences in how these barriers to equity that I just mentioned operate for those students, and in what would work to reduce those barriers to equity.

Another benefit of better disaggregated data is that it would illuminate student assets. One of the values of Every Learner Everywhere is that it's important to shift from deficit-based, assets-based discourse. For example, it's counterproductive to seeing students a lack of cultural capital instead of what they actually have, which is a wealth of cultural capital that colleges and universities perhaps have just failed to activate.

That principle, though, doesn't really help much if all of the students assets are hidden within a monolithic view of who they are. For example, one of the experts I talked with is Antoine Jefferson, the Associate Clinical Professor and Associate Dean for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the School of Education and Human Development at University of Colorado, Denver.

And he talked about how many of the Black students he works with are drawn to professions like social work and education and healthcare, and how they're enthusiastic about bridging divides between their learning and their communities.

That vision of career and community and that commitment is an asset that institutions can draw on. But it's a double-edged sword because those are also professions that are least likely to support paying internships, but particularly in social work and in the nonprofit world. But Black students on average are less able to avoid internships that are not paid.

So that's an example of the assets that a group of students may bring to a campus and that may not be fully put to use, and may even be in some degree of tension with the institutional policies when they require these unpaid internships.

I talked to a student at a different institution, not at Denver, who is much like the student Jefferson refers to. She's a first year student with a very clear vision of how she's going to use her learning to give back to her community through early childhood education, and how she wants to improve on some of the conditions that she experienced.

She loves her community, and that intention to give back is what's driving her success in higher education. But a column of data that aggregates all underrepresented students is not going to reveal that asset. So those first two bullet points are a sampling of the kinds of discussions that are in part one of the report.

And it goes on to describe how better information about students can illuminate overlooked barriers to equity, how it can enable better intersectional analysis, how it can enable localization, and how it can illuminate systemic inequities. Aggregate data tends

to hide systemic inequities and to hide the role of the college or university plays within them.

My last point for this presentation is going to pause, really, on the precipice of the primary point of the report. I've gone on and on about the need for more and more and better disaggregated data. No one I talked to for the interview stage of this project disputed that. There are patterns of lived experience that colleges and universities need to understand and grapple with in order to advance equity for every student.

But everyone I talked to also emphasized over and over again the need to get to individual stories, no matter how fine grained the data gets. Within these patterns of lived experience are individual students who don't fit patterns. Their experience of barriers to equity vary in surprising ways, and colleges and universities need to create spaces to hear and understand those stories in order to advance equity for every student.

Just in the limited interviews I did for this project, the ways in which students don't fit neatly into racial, ethnic, and economic categories has been inspiring, as much as anything else. They exude a lot of confidence about their ability to achieve if colleges will just understand them as they are and help them rather than create barriers for them. One of the findings from the interviews that I did is that students may be quite eager for uncomfortable conversations about identity. The question wasn't, do you want places to talk about identity? I put to them questions like, what they wish their institutions understood about them. But, independently, several students brought up terms like safe space, safe to talk cultural exchange. They talked about the awkwardness of these issues and how they want to embrace it and confront it head on. They seem very hungry for that.

Another finding that stood out is how hungry students are for basic human compassion from their faculty. The tiniest bit of flexibility or patience from a faculty member is vivid in their narratives about their college experiences. I'd love to give you some quotes from students to illustrate this.

Like I said, this is from a work in progress that will depend heavily on the voices of students and other experts, but we're still in the process of getting the review of how their input will be used. So I wasn't comfortable quoting from them in this presentation, but the final report will be rich with student voices.

So in summary, everyone knows it's counterproductive to treat all minoritized and poverty affected students as a monolith. Everyone agrees that different student populations probably encounter different barriers to equity or experience similar barriers in unique ways. But there is limited disaggregated data on that question, and not enough to show comprehensively how those variations are at work.

Studies of digital learning, in particular, have not disaggregated student populations by race and ethnicity. And advancing equity efforts will depend on the higher education sector generally, and on individual institutions getting better at disaggregating data and on creating systems and cultures to understand students individually.

In the meantime, hearing from students directly starts to illuminate the question. It can help institutions start to see student heterogeneity, start to see their assets, see the unanticipated barriers to equity that they face, to see what's locally relevant for a given institution, and to see the role that the institution itself plays in systemic inequities.

If you want to reach out to me to learn more about this project, here's where you can find me. As I mentioned, Every Learner Everywhere is the sponsor and publisher of this-- publisher of this project. And here is the contact information of Patricia O'Sullivan, the content manager there. Thank you very much for listening. And I'm glad to take your questions now.

NORMA HOLLEBEKE: Thank you, Robert. I do want to give you all some background on Robert. So Robert McGuire has a 28 year career as a writer and editor, marketing consultant. He has been a contingent faculty member in composition, creative writing and literature at Marquette University, Carroll University, Fairfield University, and Southern Connecticut State University.

And since 2013, through McGuire editorial and consulting, he has led a team of writers and editors specializing in educational technology, online learning, higher Ed, and workforce development. He works with us at Every Learner Everywhere to develop articles and reports about equity centered and data informed digital learning.

And with that, Robert, if you want to pop on screen, we've got some questions for you. And I ask the audience to continue submitting questions as we go through this. We've got some time. One of the first questions, rather intriguing. It says, my institution, Asian students are not included in the underrepresented minority category. Did you find any information on why it might be left out?

ROBERT McGUIRE: Well, you can hear me OK, is that right? I'm not muted, am I? I can only speculate. Someone else raised that question for me during the review process. And they were under the impression that NCES and IPEDS explicitly exclude Asian-Americans from the so-called underrepresented minority category. I couldn't actually confirm that, and I'm not sure that that's the case.

What I think-- and people are better at this or more experienced at this may be able to weigh in-- what I think is the case is the individual institutions and sometimes individual granting organizations or funding organizations make their own independent decision to not include Asian-Americans and Pacific Islanders in the so-called underrepresented minority category.

And the rationale is that in higher education, Asian-Americans presumably are not, in fact, underrepresented relative to the size of-- their size in the population at large. Now, that may be true in the abstract or in general, but it's not necessarily true at a given institution, and it's not necessarily true within a given field or domain. So you might say, well, our institution is not underrepresented as regards Asian-Americans, but it might be that your department is.

And then it might be more to the point that there are significant, very significant subpopulations within Asian-American that are not largely-- that are, in fact, underrepresented within the institutional larger within your field.

NORMA HOLLEBEKE: So even looking at Asian-American as a category or the API category, that that itself is creating a very large monolith when we categorize it that way.

ROBERT McGUIRE: Yeah. And I-- it pains to say that that's true of all the categories we're talking about. Like Black is a large and diverse category, first generation is a large and diverse category. Nevertheless, I think that when you start like the data makes that most obvious, most right away when you're talking about Latinx and Asian-American students.

Like I said, when it comes to Asian-American and Pacific Islander people in the US, we are talking about 25 different groups that the US census recognizes. And over 20 different populations or 20-- or over 15, excuse me, 15 different countries from Latin America are bundled in that group called Latinx.

NORMA HOLLEBEKE: So with that in mind, thinking about data, what is the first data type an institution should disaggregate to center equity?

ROBERT McGUIRE: Well, again, I'm coming at some degree-- to some degree from a lay context. I'm not an expert in this kind of data analysis, and I certainly recognize how difficult it is to create the data to begin with, to analyze it, to then to disaggregate it. I don't mean to make this sound easy at all. I do mean to make it sound like an imperative. It's necessarily very important.

I would say the priority-- whatever indicators your institution has decided are important, whether it's the six year graduation rate or enrollment rates or the retention rates, I mean, your institution has decided that some indicators are important. If those indicators are important for all of your underprivileged or underrepresented students or underrepresented minorities, then it's important for all of the subcategories of populations that are bundled into that monolith.

And then the particular populations that you ought to prioritize I guess is also depends on the institution also. Like I said, Every Learner Everywhere has a particular mission, and that's why this report is focusing on students who are racially or ethnically minoritized or poverty affected or first generation.

But I also want to emphasize that there are lots of other populations that are kind of obscured in the data. Whether it's students who are experiencing barriers to equity because of their gender identity or their religion or their carceral status or their immigration status, all of those are also important. So which of those you need to be disaggregating out of the student population, that's really kind of mission-driven, so to speak.

NORMA HOLLEBEKE: So you also mentioned that there's a lot of intersectionality and overlapping of racial categories. How far out are we from racial categories not really mattering in terms of barriers to students?

ROBERT McGUIRE: Well, that's a whopper. I'm not sure I'm qualified to answer that either. But, I mean, the impression I got-- and, again, I talked to-- it was a lot of conversation with students. Nevertheless, when all said and done, we're talking about a small data set of seven students. But those seven conversations were very meaningful. And with, I think, 12 other experts we had interviews with, and then the literature review.

And what my antenna kind of picked up is that what is salient for an individual changes over time. So at a given moment-- and I think during college, students-- and I think I mentioned this in the presentation-- students really have their antenna up for how income and not being able to pay for college and needing to work in order to pay for college, they're highly attuned to their economic circumstances and how that's a barrier to equity.

And then I talked to one expert who had done a lot of research in K-12 and pointed out that families, in particular parents, if not their K-12H students, have their antenna up for other issues like race. So what's salient at a given time for a given student, I think, will change over time. And that's not to say that any of those issues are never salient.

In fact, there was one person I interviewed who said that explicitly, like, the fact that I'm a woman, the fact that I'm Black, the fact that I don't have any money, all of those matter all the time. But at this given period in college, the fact that I didn't have any money was really what was giving me a lot of pressure.

NORMA HOLLEBEKE: So it's more of a comment in the question and answer, but I think it fits really well with this intersectionality question and the monolith question. So the term ethnicity should also include Middle Eastern and North African populations who are surprisingly listed as white in a lot of the federal government's data. How do you think institutions should start to tackle that?

ROBERT McGUIRE: Well, again, this is beyond the scope of what I put some reading into. I would almost-- I gladly defer to folks who have given more thought to that question. I guess what I-- I was looking for data about these particular populations, Black, Asian-American and Pacific Islander, Latinx, Indigenous, first generation and poverty affected. Well, when it comes to Latinx, for example, there's this history of accused-- confused conversation about to what degree that's describing an ethnicity and to what degree that's describing a race. And so I just think that our culture at large in higher ed-- that includes higher ed, we just do not have very advanced and mature conversations about what we-- of course, both race and ethnicity are highly contestable notions. These are constructs that nevertheless have a lot of meaning, and so we have to grapple with them and account for them.

The one person I interviewed, the way they put it is we need-- I'm going to forget it now, but they said, we need to account for these categories, but not be beholden to them.

That's a paraphrase. And that was a really important take for-- take away for me, and it informed a lot of my work on this.

And I think that that is true for higher ed generally, we need to be doing more to account for race and ethnicity and have more mature conversations about them. And to make those conversations more embedded and ingrained into the institution, and not just something that's kind of shouted at-- shouted from the sidelines for people who are more expert in this. And so it's a process. We're not far along in-- as far along in those conversations as we should be.

NORMA HOLLEBEKE: So let's take it a little bit different direction. There's a saying that says, data is not the story. The story is the story. Can you share with us how student faculty and advocates' stories helped you understand the data or lack of data you found in this project.

ROBERT McGUIRE: Well, many come to mind, so to pick one. One student that comes to mind-- and I mentioned that we hadn't got sign off from students on this yet but in the meantime, since recording the presentation, I heard from some of them.

And I'm thinking of one student in particular, and this kind of relates to the very common observation that schedules for classes are often in conflict with schedules for employment. That students need to pay for the classes, and that's a familiar issue. And that comes up a lot in the interviews I did.

Students are choosing online courses or choosing asynchronous courses to cope with that tension. Students are stopping out for semesters at a time, or even stopping out for years in order to save up money for tuition, so I feel like I'm understanding that issue pretty well.

But then a student mentioned to me two small examples of that tension between school schedule and work schedule that I hadn't really thought of. And one was a professor had-- was requiring that students print out a certain worksheet to complete it by hand before then scanning it and uploading it to the LLMs. And there are all kinds of problems with that.

And naturally the student didn't own a printer at home, but they could use the printer in the library, on the campus library. Which she was glad to do except that the hours that the library was open didn't coincide with the hours that she was free from work and from her family responsibilities to go and use the printer at the library. So there was this scheduling conflict that was really outside of the class itself.

And the two, the student, every semester before the semester starts, she sits down and she schedules and selects her classes according to her work availability compared to work. So problem avoided. There won't be this tension between class time and work time and her employment.

But once a class was underway, in one case, she found that the professor had arranged these optional group study sessions that did conflict with her work schedule, so now she's missing these optional study sessions, which is a disadvantage but not necessarily a disaster.

But she discovers later on that the information in the optional session was critical for the final exams. It was giving out during those sessions. And this student, like I referred to before, felt like the financial obstacles were a bigger influencer on her degree process than how she identified racially.

NORMA HOLLEBEKE: Well, that's big. So, we have time for one last question. And this seems to be-- it's a rather big open-ended question, but I think this is-- it's worth asking. What was the most surprising finding you had in researching this project?

ROBERT MCGUIRE: Well, I think the word surprising is maybe going to hang me up in this question because once you accept the premise that it is counterproductive to aggregate all so-called underrepresented students into one bundle, then you follow the logic of that and what follows is mostly unsurprising.

You can anticipate that, of course, these students are not all the same, of course, there's wide variation in the educational achievement of groups like Indigenous and Asian-American and so on. And, of course, Black Americans include a very large and growing population of immigrants and children of immigrants from around the world in the last 30 or 40 years.

And, of course, the tension between-- there's sometimes a tension between the values of an institution and the values that the students are bringing to campus from their home communities. So all of that is, in a sense, unsurprising but the value of this-- following this thread and explicating is that-- with some detail is that it gets ingrained into your perspective.

And so a fact that seems unsurprising becomes, over time, something-- it moves from being something you remind yourself of to something that's really part of your worldview and that informs your daily living and practices. And I think that, to some degree, that's true of institutions also. You want it to be something that moves from--

something you know when you stop to think about it to something you know without having to stop to think about it.

And at an institutional level, there are obvious statements like these students are not all the same, but that's something that a few people are shouting from the sidelines for one generation after another, and then hopefully over time becomes embedded in the institutional practices.

That said, I mentioned in the report some-- in the presentation, some of the findings that made an impression on me that I hope people and institutions do get deep into their bones, that students are eager to talk about identity, that students are hungry for flexibility and compassion.

And that they can be optimistic about their ability to succeed academically if institutions will just meet them as they are. On the one hand, of course, they are. There's nothing surprising about any of that, but, nevertheless, it really made an impression on me and was moving to me to hear that from them directly.

NORMA HOLLEBEKE: Well that's wonderful. So thank you very much, Robert, for this wonderful insight. We are definitely looking forward to the publication of your report.

Thank you to our audience for joining us for this session. We want you to stay tuned for our final session for this Every Learner Everywhere block.