Toward Ending the Monolithic View of "Underrepresented Students": *Why Higher Education Must Account for Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Variations In Barriers to Equity*

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Executive Summary

Higher education in the United States has a tendency to treat all "underrepresented" students as a monolith in ways that are counterproductive to the cause of equity. Strategic planning, operations, budgeting, support services, instructional design, teaching practices, research, commentary, and institutional culture at U.S. colleges and universities are informed by aggregated data that bundles all racially and ethnically minoritized, poverty-affected, and first-generation students together. This aggregation of "underrepresented" students obscures significant variations in admissions, course-level outcomes, persistence, graduation, and career success. As a result, designing teaching and learning to account for varied student experiences has not been an embedded part of historically white U.S. colleges and universities, and there has been little disaggregated data available to inform or support efforts to redress this.

To make progress on equity, educators and institutional leaders must be able to balance seeing and examining the patterns of lived experience among people in specific student populations with hearing how every student's experience is unique. Higher education needs systems, policies, and practices that are both informed by disaggregated data and finely tuned to the needs of individual students. Institutions, faculty, and staff must build capacity for collecting, analyzing, and using disaggregated and localized data, while also making space to learn from students about how they bring specific facets of their identities to learning. In short, to create equity, higher education needs to develop the capacity to learn from a blend of richer student data and richer student stories.

Toward Ending the Monolithic View of "Underrepresented Students": Why Higher Education Must Account for Racial, Ethnic, and Economic Variations in Barriers to Equity, synthesizes commentary, research, and programmatic activity on how higher education has so far grappled with disaggregating and using student data to confront and close equity gaps for particular student populations. The populations of interest for this project were Black, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander, Indigenous, poverty-affected, and first-generation students. We particularly sought disaggregated data about equity gaps and barriers to equity in digital learning contexts. A literature review of relevant studies and commentary was complemented by original interviews with 17 experts, including faculty, administrators, researchers, advocates, and students. Those experts are quoted at length throughout the report. The purpose of the report is to advance high-level evidence-based conversation about equity and learning — especially digital learning — in U.S. colleges and universities.

Toward Ending the Monolithic View of "Underrepresented Students" is organized into two parts:

Part 1: Why and How Accounting for Variations in Student Populations Matters for Equity

Part 2: What Works To Remove Barriers to Equity for Unique Populations

Interwoven into those parts are sections with background and related information including:

- the history and context of these racial, ethnic, and economic categories;

- the various ways "first generation" is defined;

- how historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) provide models for equity-centered institutional culture;

- exemplar programs; and

- resources and tools for creating equity-centered educational institutions.

An Appendix details where disaggregated student data does exist and provides a sampling of how that data could create more precise profiles of racially and ethnically minoritized students.

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Part 1: Why and How Accounting for Variations in Student Populations Matters for Equity

Illuminate intergroup heterogeneity

All the populations of interest in this project are extremely heterogeneous, which is a more significant factor in the student experience than is recognized in discourse about racially and ethnically minoritized and poverty-affected students.

> *"I'm originally from the Philippines, and my background is pretty different from someone who comes from China or Korea or Japan. I went to UCLA, and I saw Asian people, but they didn't have two parents working graveyard shifts. They were second- and third-generation UCLA students. That was my first exposure to what it means to aggregate communities and to the perception that it matters where you're coming from." - Elaine Villanueva Bernal, Lecturer at California State University, Long Beach and STEM, Digital Learning Strategist for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies*

Illuminate overlooked barriers to equity

Students navigate complex systems of challenges that a label of "underrepresented minority" doesn't begin to explain. Disaggregation reveals how barriers to equity are experienced by specific populations and how student experiences vary in ways that may not often be examined, such as age, carceral experience, immigration status, marital status, caregiver status, health status, dependent versus independent status, and region.

> *"[Renee] Restivo Rivera's enthusiasm for college is enormous, and she dreams of continuing [from Northwestern Connecticut Community College] to earn a bachelor's degree, but she used up her federal financial aid eligibility during an earlier attempt at college when she was a teen mother. This time, she is paying mostly out of her own earnings with little financial aid. 'I have to cut tuition down into four payments,' she explains. 'It's January 1, February 1, March 1, April 1. I have a credit card. I've been working on my credit. But it's a lot of money to come up with.'"*

Counter patronizing stereotypes

There is a complex web of overlapping anti-Blackness, colorism, classism, exploitation, and intergroup prejudice inherent in reductive "positive" stereotypes about different racial, ethnic, and economic groups. Aggregating all "underrepresented students" as one group enables this patronizing discourse within a college or university, while disaggregated data and individual stories can reveal the damaging impact these stereotypes continue to have.

"There's a stereotype for Asian Americans that they're pretty smart, they know what they're doing, and you can burden them with most of the work in group projects or assume that they don't need much help. It has definitely got me in some awkward situations where I'm trying to create boundaries for myself and finding the strength to seek help. That's about cultural awareness and not projecting cultural stereotypes. There's more than what you see. There's a lot more." - Eeman Uddin, undergraduate student at Georgia Institute of Technology

Enable intersectional analysis and practices

While there are patterns of lived experience among a given student population, those identities are not mutually exclusive of other identities. Few students identify only within a single population. The aggregation of "underrepresented students" erases experiences of race, ethnicity, economic status, sex, immigration status, age, disability, and religion. Different facets of a student's identity matter to them in unique ways, but they also matter differently over time as the salience of a given aspect of identity ebbs and flows in different circumstances.

"When I talk to my students, they're thinking about their identity in terms of how their peer reference group is able to support said identities. In other words, do they actually feel as though they have support from other students in the classroom who are at least willing to understand where they're coming from? And if not, that is the identity or the issue they feel they need the most support on." - Jasmine Roberts-Crews, Lecturer in the School of Communication at The Ohio State University

Good teaching practices informed by better data

Disaggregated data has the potential to guide educators to better implement good teaching practices. It can also productively call into question how equitable many supposedly student-centered innovations actually are. Colleges and universities need disaggregated data in order to ensure innovative pedagogy and resources have an impact for every student rather than for an average student in aggregated data.

"Tribal colleges are tracking early momentum data like the number of students who receive zero credits in the first semester. You can actually do something about that. Were they your part-time students? Were they your Pell students? You can zero in on who those students are and devise strategies to serve those students better. They're using leading indicators, which are actionable. That's very exciting." - Cindy Lopez, Executive Director, Network Engagement at Achieving the Dream

Support effective digital learning

Digital learning is an integrated part of the experience of most college and university students, but we know very little about how effective it is for specific student populations. Few studies demonstrate a relationship between a digital learning practice or resource and a positive outcome for a specific racially or ethnically minoritized group. To deliver meaningful digital learning opportunities for every learner, colleges and universities must have data-informed insight into the varied learning conditions students work in.

> *"Let's assume the college has provided money for me to purchase what I need. Now, what are the barriers to my ability to utilize this device? They might include things like the knowledge to be able to figure out how to use it. Do I have access to people who can help me figure it out? Do I feel like what I'm being asked to use it for is relevant to me and that I can produce something with it? Students' relationships to their racial and ethnic identity shapes the way they understand and use digital technology. If we don't look at that connection as educators who want to support our students, we're doing a disservice to the work."* - Danielle Leek, Dean of Online Learning and Instructional Excellence at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College

Mitigate the effects of systemic inequity

Many students bring with them the impacts of generational trauma, legalized racism, unequal school funding, and housing and food insecurity. At the same time, colleges and universities have their own legacies of racism and classism, as well as internal systems that sustain inequities. Data-informed, equity-centered pedagogy requires accounting for the various ways students experience systemic inequity. Institutions must take the lead on collecting and sharing disaggregated data about specific student populations and using that data to reflect on how the institutions perpetuate inequities for them. Individual faculty must understand and consider that data while also creating space to understand their students' individual needs and assets.

> *"There are barriers that get provoked by the lives students live outside of the university that are often not in the university's calculus. Institutional bureaucracy seems to be a representation of values and beliefs that are not driven by students. They're driven by the adult professionals who do this for their living."* - Antwan Jefferson, Associate Clinical Professor and Associate Dean for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in the School of Education and Human Development at University of Colorado Denver

Illuminate the experiences of individual students

Data alone, no matter how finely disaggregated, will never be sufficient by itself to paint a comprehensive picture of how barriers to equity vary for specific populations. Asking and learning from individual students must be an institutional practice.

> *"A lot of people come in knowing completely different amounts of information, from completely different cultures. It's important to meet them where they're at and try and help them as much as possible to have the best college experience and to succeed and get whatever degree they desire. A lot of students don't succeed because they don't feel welcomed or they don't feel college is for them because they've had bad experiences trying to understand the culture of college."* - Zaire McMican, undergraduate student at University of North Carolina Greensboro

Part 2: What Works To Remove Barriers to Equity for Unique Populations

What PWIs can learn from HBCUs and TCUs

HBCUs and TCUs, often having centered racial justice in their founding, provide models for the structural and cultural change needed at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Culturally relevant pedagogy is baked in, faculty and staff diversity is a priority, and the work to confront, identify, and reduce barriers to equity is part of the everyday work of academic affairs, student affairs, and other operations.

> *"One teacher always acknowledges that some students are working or in a situation that may not be perfect at home, so she would say, 'You can just reach out to me.' It makes you feel like your teacher wants you to succeed . . . . It comes down to understanding a student's individual needs, because every student is different. One Black student is different from another, but it's important to acknowledge it and not ignore it. Share your experiences and let students know you're there for them." - Aajahne Seeney, undergraduate student at Delaware State University*

Student affairs is leading the way

Initiatives to identify and remove barriers to equity for particular student populations tend not to be a shared responsibility in predominantly white institutions. Most examples of support uniquely tailored to specific student populations can be found in the student affairs divisions where there is history of culturally specific programming, affinity housing, and intensive cohort-based wraparound services. The centers of gravity for support programs are often in the transition from high school to college, the transition from college to career, and moments of crisis.

> *"Collaboration is the only way we will get the work of supporting first-gen students out of just being programmatic. If we want to institutionalize change for all students from marginalized communities, we have to be able to do that in classrooms. The number one question I get in the Center is how we engage faculty and academic leadership in first-generation work." - Sarah Whitley, Vice President, Center for First-generation Student Success at The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators*

Design targeted initiatives with data-informed partnerships

Many initiatives designed to reduce barriers to equity for specific student populations partner with local communities, with nonprofit or advocacy organizations, or with a broad base of partners across the institution. Cohort-based programs led by student support offices are common, but there is a tension between programs with wraparound supports for small cohorts and the need to serve every student. They may not lead to the systemic change necessary to create equity for every student.

"It is not scalable to support the needs of all marginalized populations [with wraparound services] . . . . If their academic advisor and someone in the Financial Aid Office understands the needs of a first-gen student, [a program] may not need to follow them everywhere they go across their academic careers. Some students need that level of programming, but realizing we're not going to give it to everyone, how do we create environments where the rest can be successful?"
- Sarah Whitley

Also discussed in supplementary sections and the Appendix of this report

- What do we mean by "barriers to equity" for college students?

- "First-generation student" is an inconsistently defined term. Students don't have experience identifying themselves as first generation and may be reluctant to.

- Regionality matters. A growing body of research suggests that regionality and type of institution should have a priority in comparative data analysis.

- Data sovereignty matters. Even reliable data can be misused or developed in exploitative ways. AIHEC AIMS, a data collaborative of TCUs, ensures assets-based perspectives of Indigenous students.

- Minority-serving institutions (MSIs) aren't a monolith either. HBCUs, TCUs, and several other types of federally recognized MSIs are defined.

- Some disaggregated student data does exist and provides intriguing glimmers of how "underrepresented students" can better be accounted for in all their variety. Recommended resources are included.

- How do the barriers to equity vary for different populations of "underrepresented students?" The Appendix includes a selection of data about Black, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander, and Indigenous students.

Students value kindness and understanding

Students hunger for and appreciate empathy from faculty. When asked for examples of good teachers who came to mind, students didn't mention innovative pedagogy as much as common human courtesy — giving feedback, answering questions, learning students' names, pointing to helpful resources, and being flexible about deadlines. These behaviors stand out to them in contrast to many other experiences.

"I do have teachers who are more understanding if I have to pick up a shift because somebody's sick. Other classes, the deadline is strict. If you miss it, then you don't get any points. [I wish they understood] not everybody has traditional college experience. Some people have to work in order to go to school. Everybody's lives outside of school don't always look the same." - Julianne Castillo, undergraduate at University of Hawai'i-West O'ahu

Students value safe space to address issues of identity

The students we talked to describe a desire to get into uncomfortable conversations about identity. Despite racial battle fatigue, patronizing encounters, and the alienation of being asked to educate white faculty and peers about racial and ethnic identity, students still hope for the opportunity to share themselves and to learn from others.

"I don't think there's ever been a time in human history where we've had this many people from diverse backgrounds all in one space. So we should deconstruct the default as white and make it to where there is no default. We can all learn from each other. I sincerely mean that. Cultural exchange is really valuable, especially in a space like college. I'm not sure where else you will get this body of people where it's okay to explore different interests. College leaders, I hope, recognize that this is a pivotal time in people's lives and a unique space that you don't get at any other point of your life, so to not maximize that is wasted potential." - Mark Lannaman, graduate student at Georgia Institute of Technology

Every Learner Everywhere is a network of twelve partner organizations with expertise in evaluating, implementing, scaling, and measuring the efficacy of education technologies, curriculum and course design strategies, teaching practices, and support services that personalize instruction for students in blended and online learning environments. Our mission is to help institutions use new technology to innovate teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of improving learning outcomes for Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, poverty-affected students, and first-generation students. Our collaborative work aims to advance equity in higher education centers on the transformation of postsecondary teaching and learning. We build capacity in colleges and universities to improve student outcomes with digital learning through direct technical assistance, timely resources and toolkits, and ongoing analysis of institution practices and market trends. For more information about Every Learner Everywhere and its collaborative approach to equitize higher education through digital learning, visit everylearnereverywhere.org.

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