Equity in Action in Community College Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Equity in action starts with a leader's critical consciousness in relation to their identities, ideologies, and positionalities. In this essay, the following factors: ideologies, identities, and positionalities are explained and emphasized as they are essential factors that impact equity work. Leaders who center equity must explore their own critical consciousness through an equity lens so that they prioritize equity at the forefront while leading, collaborating, and making decisions in their leadership positions. The positionality of leaders is also critical on how they use their power to influence their community and amplify the voices of the underrepresented. One subset of the findings, Equity in Action, from my dissertation, *Asian American Community College Presidents: The Power of Identities, Ideologies, and Positionalities* is included in this essay. To set the foundation of the dissertation, the SEL framework, also known as the shared equity leadership framework (Kezar et al., 2021) is used to analyze how leaders build their own capacity in equity work. In addition, my positionality and development as an equity leader are reflected in this essay.

KEYWORDS

equity, social justice, equitable, equity leadership, identity, ideology, positionality, community college leadership, higher education leadership, community college presidents, Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander

In this essay, I will share one of the themes, *Equity in Action,* from the findings chapter of my dissertation, titled: Asian American Community College Presidents: The Power of Identities, Positionalities, and Ideologies in Equity and Social Justice. I will also reflect on the shared equity leadership (SEL) framework (Kezar et al., 2021), which was used in my study to explore how community college presidents lead, implement, and promote and support equity, and how they engage with their communities in connection with their identities, positionalities, and ideologies. Additionally, my essay begins with my own development and positionality as an equity leader in relation to the SEL framework.

Equity and social justice are shaped by the individual's contextual experiences that influence their beliefs and how they understand diversity (Wilson, 2005). For the purpose of this essay, I define equity-mindedness, social justice, and equity as follows: "Equity- mindedness is conceptualized as being evidence-based, race-conscious, institutionally focused, systemically aware, and equity advancing" (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015 as cited in Kezar et al., 2021, p. 2). Additionally, "equity-minded leaders pay attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes by different social identities like race, class, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, and religion, and the systemic, historical, and political nature of such inequities" (Kezar et al., 2021, p. 2). Social justice is defined by Theoharis (2007) as "leaders to make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision. This definition centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools" (p. 223). Furthermore, equity is defined as "becoming culturally and

linguistically responsive, eliminating deficit thinking, addressing racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and other prejudices" (Shields & Hesbol, 2020, p. 3). Understanding and applying each of these definitions in the work of a leader who aims to prioritize equity, are essential.

MY POSITIONALITY AND DEVELOPMENT AS AN EQUITY LEADER

I started my equity journey in 2018 at my community college where I serve as a teaching faculty member and faculty coordinator of a learning community that serves Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander student populations. I've been working on my own self-reflection through an equity lens. In addition, while I was analyzing the data from my dissertation, I did some deep thinking and reflection as a leader. The following are my reflections that encompasses my growth as an equity leader and professor.

Through my own journey of equity, I learned that equity begins with me. This means that I have to be cognizant of my identities and how each shows up in the various spaces I work and engage in. My identities are: Asian American, a first-generation college student, second-language learner, refugee, immigrant, Hmong woman, professor, and leader. I know that, depending on the space I am in, my multiple identities come with either power, privilege, or marginalization. Throughout my life, whether a student, daughter, professor, or leader, I struggled moving from a space where I am to follow directions from my parents and elders as a Hmong daughter, to being independent and a leader as an American student and

professional. In the Hmong culture, being independent and a leader are discouraged, because Hmong is a patriarchal society, which makes it a challenge for me to be independent and a leader in my school and workspaces. To be Hmong, is also to be collaborative. My decisions reflect my family and my community. It has taken me many years to learn to alternate between being a Hmong daughter – to listen and follow, and a leader – to take charge and be independent in my career. I need to alternate between the two identities so that in my Hmong community, they accept me. Meanwhile, I must take charge and be independent in my professional career so that I thrive as a leader.

Learning about equity has affected me on how I reflect on my own ideologies and how they came to be; my ideologies impact how I approach, process, frame, and make decisions. I have also come to realize that, depending on which space I am working in, my positionality(ies) come with a certain degree of power. And with this power, I am able to engage or disengage with the communities I serve. Overall, I learned that in order to work on equity and social justice, I must be color conscious.

Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) are such ethnically diverse groups of people. Each of these groups have their own discrete cultures, customs, languages, nationalities, and/or origins in operation. As a Hmong, Asian American woman, I am very conscientious of my identities in all of the spaces I work and engage in. I also recognize that there is a lack of AANHPI individuals representing high-level leadership positions in education. For instance, more AANHPI individuals have a bachelor's degree or higher compared to other racial minority groups such as Latinx and Black. This discrepancy partially contributes to AANHPIs being seen as the "model minority" (Lee, 2019). With the same comparison of these minoritized racial groups, AANHPIs are also found to be in high-status, high paying careers such as in post-secondary education positions and other careers in the medical and engineering field. However, regardless of AANHPIs educational and professional success, we remain underrepresented in high-level leadership positions in higher education (Lee, 2019). In academia, faculty who identify as AANHPI, hold 7% of full-time faculty positions, 3% are in dean positions, 2% in chief academic officer positions, and 1.5% as college presidents (Davis et al., 2013). For these reasons, it is important for me to share my own experiences as an equitable leader, who represents AANHPI communities, and who have faced many challenges in my leadership position.

My positionality as a coordinator/leader who oversees and coordinates the AANHPI program as well as peer mentors, who are student employees, my shared equity leadership approach is to be inclusive of the voices of not only the peer mentors and staff who serve the program, but also the students in the program we serve. We offer student engagement activities that are developed in collaboration with our students. Additionally, providing a space for our AANHPI that exhibits a sense of belonging is essential so that students and peer mentors are willing to show up authentically, as well as contribute to the goals of the program. Knowing this, I must approach my engagement and decision process through the lens of equity, emphasizing inclusivity.

As faculty and coordinator of a learning community in a California community college, I recognize that there are opportunity gaps at my college campus. Native American, Latinx, Black/African American, Laotian, Pacific Islander, and Native Hawaiian students are disproportionately impacted. According to the California Community College Chancellor's office, "disproportionate impact is a condition where some students' access to key resources and supports and ultimately their academic success may be hampered by inequitable practices, policies and approaches to student support" (California Community College Chancellor's Office, n.d.). These groups of students are valuable individuals that contribute rich experiences to the community colleges. Because these groups of students are disproportionately impacted, my pedagogical approaches and leadership engagement must first provide an equitable learning environment where these students of color thrive. This includes providing a safe space for them to engage, and a space that validates their voice and experiences. Additionally, I seek to understand where my students and peer mentors of color come from so that I can support them. Overall, equity cannot be something institutes do sparingly; it needs to become part of what we eat, breath, and sleep in our entire community, from students to staff, faculty, and administration.

Lastly, the SEL framework focuses much on community engagement and collaboration. Coming from a Hmong woman and Hmong daughter identity, this approach is quite familiar to me. I recognize that, no matter which program I am leading/coordinating, or whichever project I am leading, collaboration is key to delivering an equitable process, leading to an equitable outcome. I recognize that my willingness to collaborate and provide space where my community I serve is fully engaged, and their voices are amplified, equity becomes part of the process from start to finish.

BACKGROUND OF STUDY

The purpose of my dissertation was to gain understanding of the experiences of three Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) community college presidents' recognition and consciousness of their identities, positionalities, and ideologies as they work on equity and social justice at their campuses. These factors are critical to how leaders lead, guide, engage, and communicate with their constituencies to create equitable learning experiences for students. I also focus on institutional change and engagement from a community college president's perspective, which reflects how they prioritize and work on equity and social justice at their campus. Therefore, one of my research questions was: How do the identities, positionalities, and ideologies of Asian American Community College presidents influence how they prioritize and implement equity and social justice in their campus context?

SHARED EQUITY LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK

The shared equity leadership (SEL) posits three critical components: (1) individuals who have undergone some sort of personal journey toward critical consciousness or built a critical consciousness, cementing their commitment to equity; (2) values that are shared among members of the leadership team or group; and (3) a set of practices that leaders continually enact which both enable them to share leadership and to create more just and equitable conditions on their campuses (Kezar et al., 2021).

As portrayed in the SEL framework, the commitment to equity needs individuals to critically reflect on their critical consciousness. This personal journey process involves exploring and revisiting one's identities, a process by which individuals can become vulnerable

through a humanizing process of connecting with others on their experiences. What brings these experiences to light are their identities, especially their marginalized identities. These identities include, for example, race, class, and first-generation college status. Individuals with a strong critical consciousness recount experiences in navigating institutions and systems that are inequitable and discriminatory. A critical consciousness in equity reminds individuals of their own experiences that have at some point represented "exclusion, isolation, and not belonging" (Kezar et al. 2021, p. 12). Overall, leaders will enter the work of equity at different points, but their personal journey of equity is critical for how leaders approach their work in shared leadership.

The second component of the shared equity leadership are the values of shared equity leadership. Values are developed through personal experiences (Kezar et al., 2021). Based on the SEL model, these values include the following components: love and care; vulnerability; humility; transparency; and being comfortable with uncomfortable.

The third component, practices of shared equity leadership, is that the leader operates in a way that is "inherently collaborative and inclusive" (Kezar et al. 2021, p. 6). Kezar and colleagues (2021) argued that leadership should not focus only on one individual, the leader, who makes all the decisions and guides the directions of the institute. Rather, shared equity leadership is operated by the individual and collective community simultaneously. Additionally, the foundational piece of shared equity leadership is the notion that everyone collaborates as they work towards the shared equity goals (Kezar et al., 2021). Decision making does not rely on the person with the highest title or authority, instead decision making requires collaboration and values the voices of community members.

The SEL theoretical framework was an important frame of reference for my research because understanding how leaders recognize their own level of critical consciousness is imperative to the work of equity. Secondly, this framework provided a theoretical and methodological context that was particularly fitting as I engaged in a multi-case study designed to understand the thought processes of several leaders and how they led and engaged with their respective communities as they worked to provide an equitable education for students, particularly students of color.

EQUITY IN ACTION FINDINGS: ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENTS AND THE POWER OF IDENTITIES, POSITIONALITIES, AND IDEOLOGIES IN EQUITY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

One of the themes from my dissertation was equity in action. In this section, I address the practices and decision-making processes of the three community college presidents who choose to center equity and social justice on their campus. There are three sub-themes which include, 1) Leadership Style: From Positionality to Collaboration and Inclusivity, 2) Student Voice, and 3) Challenges in Equity and Social Justice Work. All three sub-themes encompass equity in action for leadership in equity and social justice work. Lastly, each sub-theme coincides with specific components from the theoretical framework, shared equity leadership (Kezar et al., 2021).

PORTRAITURES OF THE THREE COMMUNITY COLLEGE PRESIDENT

Each president in the study identifies as Asian American and has served as college president for several years. Each participating president is closely connected to their cultural heritage and customs. Because of being a person of color, the presidents expressed that their identities are always a part of their conscious while serving their community. These identities include their racial, ethnic, and gender identities.

Sub-theme: Leadership Style-From Positionality to Collaboration & Inclusivity

The type of leadership style is critical to how a college president or CEO leads their campus. In my interviews with these three community college presidents, all of them had a similar mantra carried out in their leadership style. Each president is cognizant and implements leadership that encompasses at some level a combination of collaboration, inclusivity, engagement, building trust, and is attentive to communities of color. They use their positionality to influence their community and share the power alongside their teams. The work of equity and social justice is shared amongst varying levels of staff, faculty, and students. The following are summaries of qualitative data I collected from each of the community college presidents I interviewed for my study in the first sub-theme, leadership style.

Through the lens of an equitable leader, there are more reasons as to why the community needs to come together and work towards creating a more inclusive culture. For instance, creating a space for those who are underrepresented to be represented at the table because making decisions that focus on a particular group of people or groups of marginalized folks, is injustice when the purpose is to serve them after all. To take this a little bit deeper, one of the presidents shared that in collaborating with folks, particularly those with differing views, it's about learning where others are coming from. This includes their backgrounds and perspectives. Specifically, one president stated, "The only way to do the work is to actually have to change the hearts and minds of people. And to do this, we need to give them the capacity to do it." Overall, all three presidents understand the unique needs of bringing people of diverse backgrounds together. They also understand the need to put in the effort, dedication, and setting goals for creating communities based on collaboration and inclusiveness. That is why these are their top priorities in moving an agenda or initiative forward.

Collaboration and inclusive leadership aren't only about the president initiating, creating, and fostering spaces of belonging on their campus (Kezar et al., 2021). In fact, staff, faculty, and student groups on campus are highly encouraged to initiate and create spaces of their own. One of the presidents interviewed, noted that she makes an effort to prioritize and show up for these spaces to support her campus. Furthermore, creating spaces for collaboration and inclusiveness isn't left only to the president. The power is shared (Kezar et al., 2021). Each president's positionality is used or practiced on how they influence and share their power in the work of equity and social justice. In fact, all presidents interviewed articulate that staff, faculty, and students know that they are encouraged and supported to bring more people to the table to do equity work within their own groups and parts of the campus organization. Such collaboration has had some positive effects, as reported by the

presidents. This makes people feel that they do have a seat at the table and that their opinions really do matter.

Sub-theme: Student Voice

The sub-theme, student voice, as shared by two of the three presidents, means that students from all diverse backgrounds are included in the campus community. Their input is essential in the development and decision processes, and of initiatives or goals of the college. Student voice aligns with a major component of the shared equity leadership framework in which the leader operates in a way that is "inherently collaborative and inclusive" (Kezar et al. 2021, p. 6). In the following analysis, I explain how student voice is incorporated on each campus from the presidents' point of view. In summary, each president prioritizes student voice as being most important and their decisions all surround student input. The students are who they serve, and they know how critical it is to embed student voice in all aspects of their leadership.

Student voice is essential to the work of equity. As shared by one of the president's, "Listening to student voice is always key to every approach." Student voice is centered in every step of the planning process, especially for college initiatives. Incorporating student voice is more than being inclusive in the development and decision-making process. One of the presidents emphasized that student voice is to incorporate their perspectives and to "foster students to develop agency and leadership." Part of this strategy is to "self-empower" these students so that they learn how to advocate for themselves when they take on their own roles at their workplace or in the community. Additionally, engaging students, particularly students of color, is a priority for the each of the college presidents. This means being attentive to the multiple different communities and treating their needs as essential.

Sub-theme: Challenges in Equity and Social Justice Work

In this next theme, I will address the multiple challenges each president faced, endured, and addressed while leading their campus on their equity and social justice journey. Equity and social justice work can be very personal, draining, and requires a lot of dedication. At times, individuals might feel alone while going through their equity and social justice journey, but the key is to continue the work because they believe in the work. The challenges addressed in this section include having influence as a president, understanding the meaning of equity and social justice, taking equity and social justice to a deeper level, working with resistors, and dealing with stereotypes of AANHPI women. In connection to Kezar's (2021) theoretical framework, the fourth component notes that courage is "standing up for equity and remaining dedicated even when it's not popular or easy" (Kezar et al., 2021, p. 18). Having courage in this work is one of the foundational pieces in doing, leading, and actualizing the work into reality, especially when you have resistors.

In one particular interview, a presidents noted listening as one of the key strategies. He described listening that encompassed reflection upon oneself and processing the voices of the community. As you process, "you sort in your mind the strengths and challenges." In addition, he added:

Equity and social justice work requires one to fully be cognizant of their own identities as they do the work. Having influence is another challenge. With courage, it comes with many internal

feelings a president might feel, but it's important to keep the community moving forward. Therefore, I found that as president, having influence is a major factor, especially when you are alone in a room with people who have the opposite view from you. Having strategies on how one might influence their community is imperative in carrying this work forward. And of course, having allies in the room is always a positive approach.

Understanding equity and social justice is another challenge, although, challenges differ from college to college, and for some, it may be similar in some ways. Centering equity and social justice has been a long-standing goal of one of the community college's whose president I interviewed. However, this president admitted that though it has been a long-time goal of the college, not everyone understands the definitions of equity and social justice. This has been a challenge for her perspective since joining the college. In addition, historically, the college has embedded equity and social justice in the vision and mission, including job postings, which means that the college values it. There are policies and procedures surrounding equity and social justice, too. According to this president, on the exterior, it looks great. This goes to show that the college values and speaks the language of equity and social justice, but she described that "this work needs more."

Next is another challenge, which is taking equity and social justice beyond the surface level. As stated in the transformative leadership theory, pedagogical changes are also a key element in equity and social justice work: "It is the essential work of the educational leader to create learning contexts or communities in which social, political, and cultural capital is enhanced in such a way as to provide equity of opportunity for students as they take their place as contributing members of society" (Shields, 2010, p. 572). For example, curriculum that speaks to equity and social justice needs to be intentional.

In addition to curricular needs, working with leaders on campus to better understand themselves, how their brain operates such as how feelings are developed in certain parts of the brain is tied to one's growth on equity and social justice was shared by one of the presidents. Leaders need to develop skills and comfort in talking about equity and social justice, and it starts with having conversations focused on race. One president expressed that for some folks, it can be difficult when they operate from a deficit mindset. Knowing oneself and recognizing how their brain operates in building relationships is the first step in one's equity journey.

Equity and social justice work are more than talking. It is the actions and inactions that speaks volume about how an institution values this work. It encompasses how students are viewed, how staff, faculty, and administrators are willing to come together to talk and make changes through an equity lens. And though some leaders may have a lot of patience like one of the presidents interviewed, sometimes an institution just has to keep moving forward but always provide opportunities for resistors to join in at any point. While opportunities exist, there will always be folks in the community that choose not to join the efforts in equity and social justice work. Or there will be folks doing the work while operating from a deficit mindset. In connection to one of the president's responses about recognizing students' valid experiences, those who operate from a deficit mindset "place the burden of change on the students rather than the institution" (Kezar et al. 2021, p. 2). So, to center equity and social justice, the people creating the culture of the school need to undergo their own reflective process in their equity journey, which

requires them to reflect on themselves and their institution. Without this process, working on equity and social justice will remain a challenge.

The willingness to always learn and grow is one of the biggest components in the shared equity leadership framework and transformative leadership framework. But when a leader runs up against individuals in a community who feel that they have done enough or are already doing the work to the max, it becomes a challenge to teach, share, and foster a community that refuses to grow. For example, one president shared that one of the challenges is that some practitioners already feel "woke" and that "they don't have things to learn." This president went on to elaborate that every time professional development opportunities are provided and your own community questions "why do I have to learn all of this? Why do I have to keep doing this when I'm already down right? I already have anti-racism down." Instead, this president shared that at some point "I just don't want to burn my energy on that." So as a result, she turns to her new hires and focuses on hiring folks who understand the equity and social justice goals and responsibilities of the college and go from there. These are some continuous challenges CEOs have to be attentive to and be proactive about and lastly, to never give up.

Working with resistors is always present and always a challenge. One president faced faculty resistance during her tenure as faculty at another community college. Her goal was to do multicultural infusion in the curriculum. However, the pushback from faculty came from a place of confrontation. Comments such as, "How can I be biased when I'm treating everybody exactly the same? Or "Why should I change my evaluation and grading?" Further complaints from faculty such as, "I'm not doing equity work because I'm not just prioritizing Latinx students or Black students in the classroom." These examples show that these faculty come from a place where they either do not understand equity and social justice or do not care about it for the sake of their students.

Lastly, stereotypes of Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander women are a challenge in itself. Both female presidents endured stereotypes in their role as college president. Stereotypes such as Asian women being quiet and submissive was one of the challenges. For example, there were several instances when one of the female presidents was touched inappropriately and had to speak up to defend herself. Specifically, in casual conversation, her colleagues, board members she was serving with, touched her shoulder or back and she had to remind them that it was making her uncomfortable or that it was inappropriate. Prior to this incident, the dean of her department decided to take off his shirt in his office during their one-on-one meeting and she had to speak up for herself.

CONCLUSION

Though this study had a small sample, the findings reaffirmed that the identities, positionalities, and ideologies individuals have, particularly leaders of the AANHPI community in CEO positions, do affect the work of equity and social justice, particularly on how they prioritize this work. Each president had a consciousness of their identities, and their equity and social justice experiences were connected to their contextual experiences. This resulted in how they understood the diversity of their students. Individual experiences, identities, ideologies, and positionalities all influence one's capacity

to understand and lead equity and social justice work. Furthermore, equity and social justice work is collaborative at all levels (Kezar et al, 2021). Planning and decision making should not be top down. Instead, everyone in the community, including students, have a voice, and everyone has a role in what to do and how to carry out this work. Overall, the work of equity and social justice is shared. In order for the campus to reach its goals, everyone needs to do their part in moving the needle.

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