

The Exigency of Centering Equity in Educational Leadership Development:

A Journey Through CANDEL

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ABSTRACT

I am an example of a transformed higher education administrator. In this essay, I describe how my journey to an education doctorate impacts my work as a scholar-practitioner in higher education. The CANDEL program challenged what I thought I understood about the status quo in higher education with respect to race, socio-economic impacts, meritocracy, grit, and assumptions we make about students. The coursework and cohort model confronted my own biases and were foundational to my dissertation questions. Conducting my research on university leadership at my home institution gave me an opportunity to develop a shared equity leadership approach to solving complex problems. Equity-focused work in higher education is a long-game, ongoing, and essential to addressing the challenges facing our institutions. Without this, inequities experienced by faculty, staff and students will persist. The education doctorate and its scholar-practitioners are important drivers in shifting the American educational landscape.

KEYWORDS

higher education, equity stance, educational leadership, shared equity leadership, cohort education, education doctorate

I am an example of a transformed higher education administrator. My journey to a doctorate in education in the Capital Area North Doctorate in Educational Leadership (CANDEL) program (2019-2022) challenged what I thought I understood about the higher educational landscape. This is also a personal journey toward critical consciousness (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Kezar et. al, 2021) and my equity stance evolved through the curriculum and the cohort model of education. As scholar-practitioners and students, we examined the status quo in education and the inequitable outcomes students experience depending on race and socio-economic backgrounds. As administrators, we make assumptions about our students--that students with grit and determination will be successful no matter how many barriers are in their way (Duckworth et al., 2007). Institutions of higher education perpetuate the myth that they are meritocracies, that one's talents, skills and abilities will provide access and determine success. Research and evidence suggest otherwise (Carnevale & Stough 2013; Kezar et al. 2021) and education scholars continue to challenge the dominant culture and the status quo in a movement toward greater access and equity (Harper et al., 2018; Patton, 2016). Liu (2011) stated that when considering meritocracies, a lack of acknowledgement of society's structural inequality leads to the assumption that when students do not reach their educational goals, it is due to their own shortcomings, not the structure of educational institutions.

As context, my identity and background include that I am a White, cis-gender female who is straight. I spent my childhood in Europe and the U.S. and benefited from growing up in two different cultures, recognizing that these are both Euro-centric. I was fortunate to have this life experience, which shapes my educational and

personal value system to this day. Although my family was not wealthy, I attended well-resourced public schools in relatively affluent communities. My family instilled in me values of inclusion, tolerance, and appreciation for global diversity. As an adult, my own education and my career in higher education were shaped in environments that were supportive of first generation, underrepresented and non-traditional students. I believe that this informed my personal and professional growth, in alignment with values of equity, diversity, inclusion, and community that embody the institutions I've been fortunate to be a part of.

I came to the CANDEL program with a background in science and an undergraduate degree in Zoology from a large, public urban university, where I also completed a master's degree in Marine Biology. My coursework, research opportunities, peer communities, role models and mentors were all scientists. While I attended one of the most diverse university campuses in the United States, my colleagues, mentors, peers and friends were predominantly White. In my social and professional circles, conversations about equity and access were focused primarily on gender parity in academia, a gap that remains (Malisch et al., 2020). By the time I started the CANDEL program in Summer 2019, I had spent over two decades working in higher education and understood that shifting population demographics, projected enrollment and budget cliffs continue to magnify inequities in higher education that impact increasingly greater numbers of students (Carnevale & Strough, 2013).

What I learned in coursework and in researching my dissertation topic is that long-existing educational inequities are embedded in our societal structure (Pincus, 1996). Concepts such as



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'educational debt' (Ladson-Billings, 2006) connect socio-economic debt and property rights to describe this impact on marginalized students and communities (Cabrera, 2020). A substantial volume of research over the last half-century has dissected and revealed underlying shortcomings of the American education system in addressing these long-standing access and equity gaps (Carnevale & Strough 2013; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Harper et al., 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The concept of higher education as a meritocracy (Liu, 2011)—in which grit and determination are seen as the way to educational achievement—ignores the effect of racial, economic, and societal structures embedded within institutions (Harper, 2012; Liu, 2011).

PURSUIING A DOCTORATE

After decades serving in higher education administrative positions, I decided to pursue a doctorate in education, a decision that was initially purely for career advancement.

My cover letter in my application to graduate school provides a window into my thinking at the time. Through my experiences and engagement with programs focused on supporting students from historically marginalized communities, I was interested in understanding how university structures and organization could sustain and continue to support student success initiatives.

When I reflect on the time before I began my journey to my doctorate, my understanding of equity gaps in higher education was framed in a deficit mindset. I believed that the only way that students who were struggling could be uplifted was through programs and assistance to help them navigate college. These included programs supporting first-generation, historically underrepresented students in the sciences, formerly incarcerated students and foster youth, and campus initiatives dedicated to improving student success and graduation rates. While many of the programs I supported or was involved in were incredibly impactful and significantly improved student outcomes, there remained an assumption that the students needed assistance, not that institutional structures were deficient in meeting students where they were.

There are two critiques of this approach to supporting students: the grant-funding model of most programs and the failure to address institutional structures that perpetuate inequity. In my cover letter, I said that I wanted to understand how a university that was financially and organizationally strong could continue to sustain student success initiatives and programs that supported marginalized communities. Often, these programs are structured to be funded through grants, for only a few years at a time, and the institutional support needed tends to not be available due to budget constraints. Additionally, many of the programs do not focus on changing the institutional structures that perpetuate equity gaps. Instead, programs tend to focus on the needs of the students, making them responsible for change, rather than changing the institution (Kezar et al. 2021). The resources and institutional commitment needed to dismantle and rebuild organizational structures and remove embedded biases are substantial. In most institutions, there is no budget or frankly bandwidth to undertake a project of this magnitude. Kezar et al. (2021) suggest that a shared equity leadership framework in which leaders see closing equity gaps as both a personal and institutional responsibility, is required to address dismantling institutional policies and practices that impede student success.

Early manifestations of my equity stance, in retrospect, were myopic. I understood student diversity in terms of numbers, such as achieving Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) (<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/ideshsi/title5legislation.pdf>) or Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-serving Institutions (AANAPISI) designations (<https://www2.ed.gov/programs/aanapi/index.html>), noted by reaching an enrollment minimum of certain populations of students. I was less aware of the need to focus on the "servingness" aspect of achieving these designations (Garcia et al. 2019); what "servingness" means; and how much of being able to serve all students involves institutional transformation and an examination of the structural elements of the university where inequities are deeply embedded (Cabrera, 2020).

The CANDEL program was transformative because it allowed me to step outside of myself. The opportunity to re-evaluate your positionality and privilege and examine your own biases is one that is not readily available to busy working professionals. Developing a practice of equity-mindedness (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015), we confronted our own biases, stereotypes and assumptions, and began to see our roles as scholar-practitioners in closing equity gaps in our respective educational spaces. In parallel, the curriculum brought us into deep and thoughtful discussions about issues of educational access, equity gaps and how these persist in our educational systems. Before enrolling in the program, I knew that I had been fortunate in my educational journey; reflecting back post-doctorate, I could also see that much of this privilege was because our educational system was built by and for people who look like me (Cabrera, 2020). The concept of shared equity leadership (Kezar et al. 2021), where equity is everyone's responsibility, started to take hold as I began developing a framework for my dissertation.

Meritocracy and grit are education myths that are fueled by racist and classist assumptions that hard work and grit are enough to overcome the systemic barriers faced by marginalized groups (Patton, 2016). As a product of the American education system, I believed the myths that higher education is a meritocracy, and that grit and perseverance are all that is needed to reach one's goals. Liu (2011) examined the concept of merit, and its original description as "a pejorative term used to describe a social system that develops based on intelligence testing and educational attainment" (p. 385). People generally see merit as a positive concept where skill, ability and educational attainment are rewarded, rather than membership in a particular demographic or social class. However, Liu (2011) also suggested that pervasive social inequities are unaccounted for when considering merit, leading to assumptions that students who fail to achieve in higher education are solely responsible for their failure.

The concept of "grit" is defined by Duckworth et al. (2007) as "perseverance and passion for long-term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (p. 1088). Like the myth of education as a meritocracy, grit does not account for greater societal inequities that undergird the lived experiences of individuals from marginalized communities (Pincus, 1996). This deficit thinking blames the individual for their perceived lack of success or progress in a system that places systemic barriers and obstacles before them (Kezar et al., 2021; Smit, 2012). Grit ideology and deficit thinking are main themes in the narrative of educational meritocracy, yet these practices continue to marginalize the very communities institutions portend to support (Gorski, 2016), evidenced by the persistent inequity observed in higher education (Carnevale & Strough, 2013; Kezar et al. 2021).

COURSEWORK AND A COHORT MODEL

Dowd and Bensimon (2015) conceptualized equity-minded leadership as the means by which higher education leaders develop their own praxis in response to challenging and complex issues of equity, diversity and access. Kezar et al. (2021) further elaborated and suggested that equity-mindedness includes a journey toward critical consciousness in which “individuals question their own assumptions, recognize biases and stereotypes that harm student success, become accountable for the success of their students, and see closing racial and other gaps as their personal and institutional responsibility” (p. 2).

Through the curriculum and cohort model, the CANDEL program allowed me to step back and re-evaluate my perspective on the status quo in higher education with respect to race, socio-economics, meritocracy, grit, and assumptions we make about ourselves and our students. The program clarified that to address systemic inequities in education, organizational structures and practices need to change to meet the needs of students, rather than students adapting to the institution. In its mission, the CANDEL program is responsive to the current dynamics in education and aims to “advance equity and opportunity for all education stakeholders by nurturing and developing scholar-practitioners who are primed to: “Deconstruct and challenge systemic issues that perpetuate educational and broader social inequities; Engage critically with educational theory and research to inform leadership practice; Collaboratively problem-solve and bring practice-based expertise to advance scholarly inquiry” (CANDEL website: <https://education.ucdavis.edu/candel-about-program>).

One of the most powerful components of the program was the initial in-person “Summer Institute”, when the incoming cohort and second year students met for an off-site retreat. Here deep connections and bonds were established, as we created a “community agreement” for our cohort. This was a very challenging exercise that laid the foundation of how we would work and learn together, how we would communicate and how we would navigate difficult conversations and disagreements. The Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate (CPED) developed the CPED framework that defines and advocates for guiding principles for Ed.D. programs (<https://www.cpedinitiative.org/the-framework>). Adams and Jeter (2021) discussed the importance of building community and social presence in online Ed.D. programs, referencing the CPED framework’s focus on community and collaboration and Community of Inquiry. The CPED advises that one of the elements of mentoring and advising is “dynamic learning that provides open communication, critical friendships, and peer-to-peer support with reciprocal interactions and responsibilities that form a community of learners inclusive of adviser, mentor, and peer relationships” (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2019). The social presence of “critical friendships” (Adams & Jeter, 2021) was particularly meaningful to me. From the initiation of our summer institute, our cohort grew into a community in which peers provided support, encouragement, and also challenged one another. Creating community among the cohort was a powerful exercise that I’ve brought with me into my practice as a higher education administrator.

The cohort model is an integral component of developing current and future education leaders. Students in these programs become resources for one another, academically, personally, socially, and professionally (Bista & Cox, 2014). The CANDEL program is structured to support working professionals. It is a demanding

program that requires a commitment of time, as well as mental and emotional energy. Through its cohort framework, CANDEL builds a community of scholar-practitioners who address issues in the K-20 educational system through an equity lens. The initial two years of coursework include a sequential series of courses in which we develop dissertation topics and lay the framework for our research. This is happening in parallel to our professional responsibilities, and the two worlds are intertwined and inevitably impacting one another.

The cohort model, and the creation of a community of scholars creates a space for personal and professional development. To understand challenges of equity and access in higher education (Carnevale & Strough, 2013), it is important to also understand the K-12 ecosystem and its relationship to higher education. Kazis (2006) outlined the significant disconnections between K-12 and higher education and the impact on student success particularly among marginalized communities. K-12 was not an area in which I had any expertise beyond my own experience as a student decades ago. In our cohort, roughly half of us were K-12 practitioners, with the rest in various roles in higher education. This provided a powerful exchange of ideas and experiences in which each of us developed a greater understanding of our respective areas, and the impact each system had on the other.

Like any leader, my lived experience informs my professional practice. That lived experience as a cis-gender, straight, White woman results in a default to seeing gender equity before that of other identities. Through CANDEL’s cohort model, we engaged in deep learning about each of our lived experiences: women and men of color, members of the LGBTQA+ community, peers from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, peers experiencing personal and mental health challenges, working parents, among many other identities and perspectives. But it went deeper than just learning: it was about understanding, and seeing education through the lenses of my peers. This was invaluable for us all, but in my own experience, my cohort taught me more than what I might have read in journals. I carry all their journeys and perspectives into my own higher education practice, modeling just and compassionate education leaders.

Learning how to build community in a cohort as an emerging scholar-practitioner is an essential skill that is leveraged in future leadership positions, particularly in equity-focused work. In their development of a shared equity leadership approach to addressing equity gaps in higher education, Kezar et al. (2021) asserted that “At the heart of shared equity leadership is the notion of a personal journey toward critical consciousness, in which leaders develop or strengthen a commitment to equity through identity, personal experiences, or relationships and learning” (p. 1). Fundamentally, the creation of a community, much like a cohort, is essential to a shared leadership approach, allowing education leaders to broaden the impact of their equity work through intentional collaboration, collective responsibility and shared goals.

At the same time as receiving my acceptance letter to the program, I was also offered a significant promotional opportunity at an institution that was very different from the one where I’d spent the first decades of my career: research intensive, selective, high performing and well resourced. Yet, this institution was also beginning to implement a plan to eliminate equity gaps in retention and graduation rates among its undergraduate population. In 2019, I began my journey to an education doctorate and a new position, months before the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the world.



THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND RACIAL UPRISINGS OF 2020

The first test of resilience came in March 2020, when the world shut down in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout 2020 and 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic converged with the reckoning of longstanding systemic, racial, economic, and public health inequities. Colleges, universities, and schools shifted to remote instruction almost overnight. With little to no experience with remote instruction, both students and instructors had to pivot. As a cohort, we learned how to create community in a virtual space.

The country was now experiencing protests and unrest around racial justice and reckoning of systemic racism. University leaders across the country were tackling these issues, while also facing the inequities of higher education now laid bare by the pandemic. Like my peers in the program, I was having a dual experience, one as a student, and the other as an education administrator. Concurrent with being a full-time graduate student in the CANDEL program, I was navigating a new position at a new institution. Launched into crisis mode, I worked collaboratively with my campus colleagues to figure out how to deliver courses remotely and maintain a safe learning and working environment. I served on or co-chaired campus-wide committees to address testing, campus access, and remote instruction, while also maintaining academic rigor and educational continuity. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified inequities that had always interrupted student success, such as lack of access to technology, flexibility to handle life circumstances such as elder or family care, or mental health and access to needed support. This was the space in which I developed my dissertation topic.

FINDING A DISSERTATION TOPIC

I was initially interested in gender equity in leadership, particularly in university presidencies—a reflection of my own professional aspirations at the time. Ultimately, the CANDEL coursework, the pandemic, and the racial uprisings against systemic racism in 2020 steered me toward understanding how university leadership navigated these unprecedented challenges. Leadership is the most critical element in setting the direction and priorities of a university's response to challenges (Kezar et al. 2021). The purpose of my dissertation study was to examine the leadership and organizational factors that contributed to the university's response to COVID-19 and the protests of endemic racism in America. I wanted to understand how university leaders reflected upon and developed their own leadership praxis as they led the university's response to these unprecedented challenges.

How did leaders navigate their roles in the context of systemic racism and inequity in higher education? Ladson-Billings (2020) suggested that this was the time for leaders to take the reins and tackle issues of systemic racism and inequity head on. COVID-19 created a disruptive and unforeseen challenge, and the rare opportunity for a “reset” in higher education. Conducting my research on university leadership at my home institution gave me an insider perspective and an opportunity to witness whether leaders center equity in their decision-making and their approaches to solving complex problems. I began my study by conducting interviews in early Spring 2022. I interviewed ten leaders to learn and understand how they navigated their own leadership praxis during the height of the pandemic and the racial reckoning of 2020 and 2021.

My background in science biased me against qualitative research. I thought it was less rigorous, less informative, less objective—meaning, in turn, that qualitative data were subjective and ambiguous. I saw data analysis as a dichotomy rather than on a continuum. Ercikan and Roth (2006) described how the polarization of qualitative and quantitative data in education research limits intellectual inquiry, and inaccurately attributes properties of objectivity and generalizability only to quantitative research. The authors instead propose an integrated approach to education research on a continuum rather than a dichotomy, in which the research questions drive the mode of the inquiry (Ercikan & Roth, 2006). It was not until I began developing my own research questions that I could see that a qualitative approach was what would allow me to deepen my understanding of university leaders and their own experiences navigating COVID-19 and the racial uprisings of 2020-2021.

At the same time as I was conducting my study, I was also engaged in the campus' response to these crises, working alongside campus leadership. I witnessed first-hand the deliberations and decisions that confronted them daily, and as I started analyzing data, I began to see alignment with values of care, compassion, equity, and authentic, shared leadership. In observing campus leadership, I witnessed how each adopted or deepened their commitments to equity and justice. There was a feeling of authenticity driving an institutional shift. Witnessing the work of just leaders, being able to see it in my research and witness it on the ground was powerful.

Prior to the pandemic, in Fall 2019, academic leadership at my new institution was engaging in discussions about student success, and how the campus could address persistent equity gaps in graduation and retention rates, and in my new role, I was at the table. Bringing together colleagues from various units across campus, these discussions were centered on the removal of barriers the institution was putting in front of students, not what the students needed to overcome the barriers. Those early conversations evolved into a campus-wide initiative to eliminate equity gaps in educational and professional outcomes for faculty, staff, and students. This is an institutional commitment to eliminating inequity, adopting a collaborative approach to tackle complex problems by addressing policies, practices and structures to make meaningful changes. These are the same elements that embody Kezar et al.'s (2021) shared equity leadership. Being a student in the CANDEL program at the same time as engaging in critical conversations about educational access and equity on my campus provided me with the opportunity to participate in a shared equity leadership framework in action. As a part of the leadership team on these efforts, my concurrent experience in CANDEL, its coursework, the cohort model and my dissertation project, I've tried as best I can to bring an equity lens to the initiative. My journey as a scholar-practitioner has informed my work as a university administrator. Sometimes it's as simple as asking if everyone who needs to be part of the discussion is present at the table, critically evaluating information to include those who are most affected by a decision or policy change, and constantly asking myself if I am equity-minded in my decisions and actions.

EMPOWERING LEADERS TO SHIFT THE EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

Educational leadership programs must be responsive to the challenges of our educational systems and provide transformative



experiences for education leaders. A cohort experience is essential to the holistic learning and growth of leaders in education. Centering equity in coursework throughout the curriculum provides a continuity of dialogue that allows scholar-practitioners to evolve their equity stance and bring this back to their own institutions.

Scholar-practitioners often have a direct impact on policies, practices, and leadership at their home institutions. This leadership praxis has the potential to be transformative in a way that scholarship alone cannot achieve, and this is the power of the education doctorate (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2019). By centering equity, ethics and social justice in its coursework, research, and development of current and future leaders, programs such as CANDEL create a community of scholar-practitioners who address issues in the K-20 educational system through an equity lens. These equity-minded leaders set the tone for the organizations or units they lead, driving institutional philosophy and priorities (Kezar et al. 2021).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS AND INDIVIDUALS

My journey to a doctorate in educational leadership was a personal and professional transformation. When I say that I am a transformed university administrator, I acknowledge that I am still on my personal journey toward critical consciousness, in which I continue to develop and strengthen my commitment to equity. I do this through my identity, personal and professional experiences and relationships (Kezar et al., 2021, p. 1). Given the long-standing equity gaps in our educational systems, Ed.D. programs developing the next generation of education leaders and scholars have a moral responsibility to center equity and pragmatic approaches to eliminating equity gaps in student success.

A cohort-based program is essential to developing skills for community building, compassion and empathy, and a greater understanding of different life experiences. In the leadership roles in which scholar-practitioners find themselves, their cohort experience allows them to approach complex problems in a collective, shared leadership framework and sense of personal and institutional responsibility for addressing equity gaps.

Research and studies in educational leadership that center equity provide insight and guidance into the challenges faced by leaders, but also offer practical solutions that will transform the education landscape, such as a shared equity leadership approach (Kezar et al., 2021). While rooted in theoretical frameworks, the research and leadership development in educational leadership doctoral programs are directly connected to the daily practice of scholar-practitioners within our K-20 institutions. Through its direct connection to the work itself, and by centering equity in programs, research and practice, the education doctorate holds a critical space in driving change in the education landscape.

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