Ensure Students Are Learning:

Asset-based, equity-minded approaches to teaching and learning

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Representation and Context Matters: The Impact on Student Learning Outcomes

Demographers project that by the year 2045, the United States will be a majority-minority nation as people of color will outnumber whites for the first time in its history (Vespa, Medina, & Armstrong, 2020). As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, the shifting demographics are reflected across educational tiers. K-12 and postsecondary education resembles the larger societal context in some respects. The growing cultural pluralism in society presents a paradox as the characteristics of American educators remain homogenous and unchanged.

Twenty-five years ago, two-thirds of public school students were white; by 2019, less than half were (Hussar & Bailey, 2013). Fifty-one percent of school-aged children in public K-12 education are racially minoritized students (i.e., African American/Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latinx). However, 81% of public K-12 teachers are white (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). This is more than a demographic mismatch between teachers and students occurring in elementary and secondary education. It is a racial gap that is persistent and widens between students and their instructors as racially minoritized students matriculate and subsequently enroll in college.

American college faculties are not racially/ethnically diverse as the diversity of college professors has not kept pace with the increasing diversity of students who are matriculating to postsecondary institutions. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), 76.2% of all U.S. faculty across institutional types (associate's degree or higher degree-granting institutions) are white. By contrast, white students account for little over half of undergraduates (55%). Hence, 45% of undergraduates are members of racially minoritized groups while only 24% of instructors are faculty of color (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2018). The community college context mirrors the larger higher education landscape as half of students enrolled for credit are from racially minoritized popu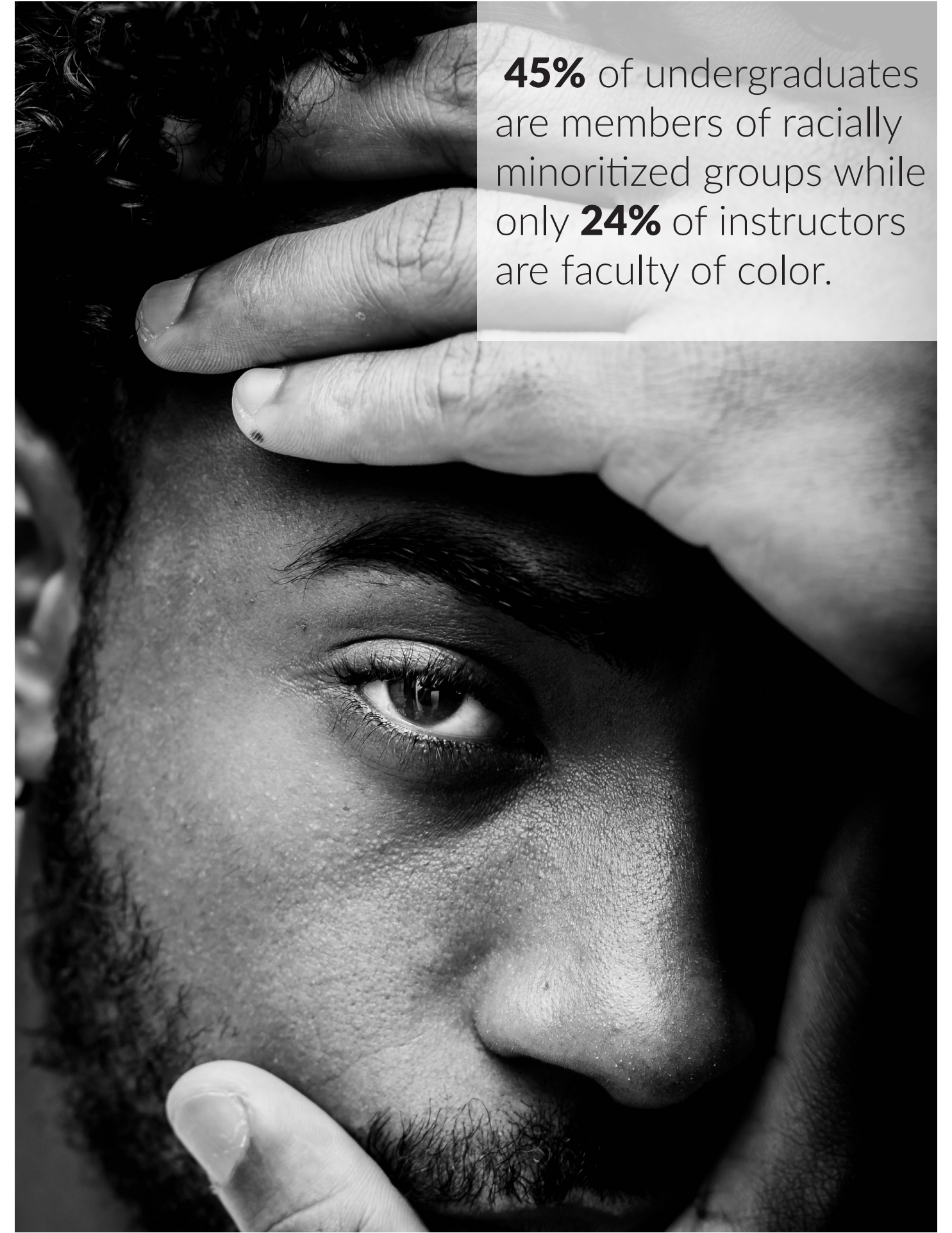lations and 45% of enrollment for white students is in credit-bearing courses (American Association of Community Colleges, 2020).

It is both desirable to diversify the faculty from K-12 through postsecondary education and necessary, as the slow, incremental increases in faculty of color are not trending in a manner that is representative of today's students and the projected demographics instructors will serve in the near future. Representation as well as context matter as studies have found that students who have teachers who share their racial/ethnic background experience less racial bias, higher teacher expectations, are identified for gifted and talented programs, have a higher likelihood of graduating from high school, have greater academic achievement, and have greater odds of going to college and graduating (Barshay, 2016; Gershenson & Papageorge, 2018). Although the majority of American K-12 teachers are white, middle-class females and the American professoriate are largely white males, demonstrating that the incongruence between student demographics and the characteristics of faculty is a perennial pipeline concern that cuts across every tier of education.

A Deeper Dive: Cultural Awareness and Unpacking Learning Inequities

There are deeply rooted issues relative to race, structural racism, and colonizing practices that impact pathways of postsecondary entry, college experiences, and student outcomes. Particularly, there are unique challenges when well-intentioned, dominant-group faculty err on the side of applying colorblind approaches. As a result, students' cultural values are often neglected and frequently majority faculty lack cultural awareness.

It is not uncommon that racially minoritized students routinely interact with faculty who do not demonstrate awareness of their cultural background, institutional racism, or feel it is imperative to do so (Lundberg, Kim, Andrade, & Bahner, 2018; Su & Behar-Horenstein, 2017). Consequently, racially minoritized students are expected to cross cultural borders daily with instructors who do not acknowledge or understand their cultural specificity and have little to no critical

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awareness of their own personal cultural grounding relative to whiteness, white privilege, and so forth (Christopher, Wendt, Marecek, & Goodman, 2014). In drawing on this disconnect in faculty cross-cultural awareness, knowledge, skills, and practice authors Flynn, James, Mathien, Mitchell, and Whalen argue we must "encourage community colleges to urge their faculty to be more thoughtful about pedagogy and methods and further encourage fostering critical practices and culturally relevant pedagogies that promote criticality, community building, and sharing of cultural capital as it relates to both academic and professional environments, leading to empowerment for students" (2017, p. 83-84).

Even as educators across sectors seek to advance opportunities for all, less universal is the understanding that fundamental to improving conditions for how students fare in society is a need to have common understanding and level setting of what exactly we mean by equitable. What does it look like in action to be equity-minded? And how can an educator or institution purport to engage in equity-mindedness without examining individual/ personal as well institutional and structural/ systemic contributors that help and hinder racial equity in learning outcomes in order to ensure that all students succeed?

The Guided Pathways Model is one tool to get students on a pathway. Embedded in the framework of Guided Pathways is ensuring that all students are learning. A precursor to getting students on a pathway as well as keeping students on the path are nuanced understandings and application of equity-minded practices. In other words, part and parcel to fostering equitable student outcomes is having a shared language and pairing it with action.

Commonly Contested and Conflated Terms

There is repeated confusion as well as disagreement on key concepts and what is frequently pegged DEI efforts (i.e., diversity, equity, and inclusion). Diversity, equity, and inclusion is referenced in a manner that is synonymous but is inaccurate in relation to the underlying meanings, goals, and

that which should result from efforts to advance educational equity. Inclusion generally involves which individuals and groups have the ability to take part in various aspects of society and how to broaden participation—in effect provide opportunities for underserved, overlooked, and disadvantaged persons/groups (typically disenfranchised based on their identity) and give them a sense of belonging. Hence, equity and inclusion are regularly tied to social justice imperatives. Yet time after time educators claim they have inclusive classrooms and that the college values inclusion without actually "doing social inclusion" (Barron, 2015). Likewise, this paradox is familiar as faculty, staff, and administrative leaders have shared ad nauseam that they are "committed" to equity yet fail to transfer that objective from theory to action.

Complicating matters, equity has been used interchangeably with equality, fairness, and justice. The latter terms bear some overlap but are mutually exclusive from equity. Equity is the process involved in achieving the ultimate goal of equality and refers to the distribution of benefits and costs (i.e., impacts) and the extent to which they are considered appropriate (Litman, 2002). Welton and LaLonde clarify the muddled nature of "equity" and "equality" as concepts applied to education, stating, "Equity in education provides students with the varied, additional, or differentiated supports needed to achieve equality" (2013, p.6).

Scholar Estela Bensimon has long argued that faulty, staff, and administrators need to be equity-minded if they are to challenge status quo and produce an equity culture within their organizations that increases student success with racially just outcomes (Bensimon, 2007, 2018). Equity-mindedness includes being informed by current statistics on demographics of students, faculty, and staff and monitoring intersectional inequity at the course, program, and campus levels (i.e., across race, ethnicity, gender, social class, disability, sexuality, nationality, language, religious affiliation, etc.). However, being an equity-minded educator means having critical cultural awareness (e.g., not engaging in race neutrality and color-

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blind pedagogies). Equity-mindedness is one step toward equity consciousness. Equity consciousness purposely promotes culturally responsive practices that best advance educational opportunities and outcomes for racially minoritized, marginalized students (Zamani-Gallaher, 2019). Equity-conscious faculty are data-informed, have critical cultural awareness, and take intentional action in providing culturally relevant materials and asset-based instruction that produces anti-racist education.

Therefore, a shared vocabulary and common language around building an equity-minded, asset-based instructional culture of teaching and learning is needed. The following are additional key terms that should be understood in theory and operationalized in practice to ensure all students are learning.

Anti-Racism involves examining white racial dominance in society to understand how it functions to take action against racism (Young & Laible, 2000).

Anti-Racist Education occurs when American educational organizations decenter whiteness, challenge white supremacy, problematize and situate racism in their institutional equity efforts, with the understanding that anti-racist change is essential to advancing educational equity (Welton, Owens, & Zamani-Gallaher, 2018).

Asset-Based Teaching incorporates approaches such as employing culturally relevant materials and assignments through the use of culturally responsive pedagogical practices. Asset-based teaching does not perpetuate deficit perspectives and consciously acknowledges students (e.g., their race, ethnicity, language, culture, etc.) as a resource that provides intellectual capital and contributions to teaching and learning (Civil, 2017).

Colorblindness is a failure to recognize and refusal to accept the racial identity, culture, and history of an individual or group (Scholfield, 2001).

Critical Cultural Awareness is understanding that there is no one-size-fits-all model and that the personhood of individuals is laden with culture since any practice not grounded in advancing the whole person will not advance equitable outcomes if it is not organized from the outset with attention to culture, especially with respect to marginalized groups (Christopher, Wendt, Marecek, & Goodman, 2014).

Critical Race Achievement Ideology acknowledges that the active influence of racism and other barriers commonly hampers academic success for racially minoritized students (Carter, 2008).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy are instructional practices that "recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities" while promoting student academic achievement that maintains cultural integrity (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 476).

Culturally Responsive Teaching involves conscious awareness that "culture is at the heart of all we do in the name of education, whether that is curriculum, instruction, administration, or performance assessment" (Gay, 2018, p. 8). Instructors modify pedagogical approaches to incorporate classroom interactions that reflect students' cultural values, which subsequently shapes learning. Culturally responsive teaching "centers classroom instruction in multiethnic frames of reference" (p. xxvii).

Multicultural Competence is when instructors have awareness of their own cultural identity in addition to the ability to embrace the perspectives and worldview of students in a manner that evolves one's teaching style and further develops the curriculum to be culturally responsive (Gay, 2002).

Multicultural Self-Efficacy reflects instructors' awareness, knowledge, and experiences with other cultures as well as their perceived effectiveness teaching diverse students (Guyton & Wesche, 2005). Multicultural self-efficacy is the perceived abilities educators have of themselves relative to delivering equitable instruction to racially/ethnically and culturally diverse students (Holcomb-McCoy, Harris, Hines, & Johnston, 2008).
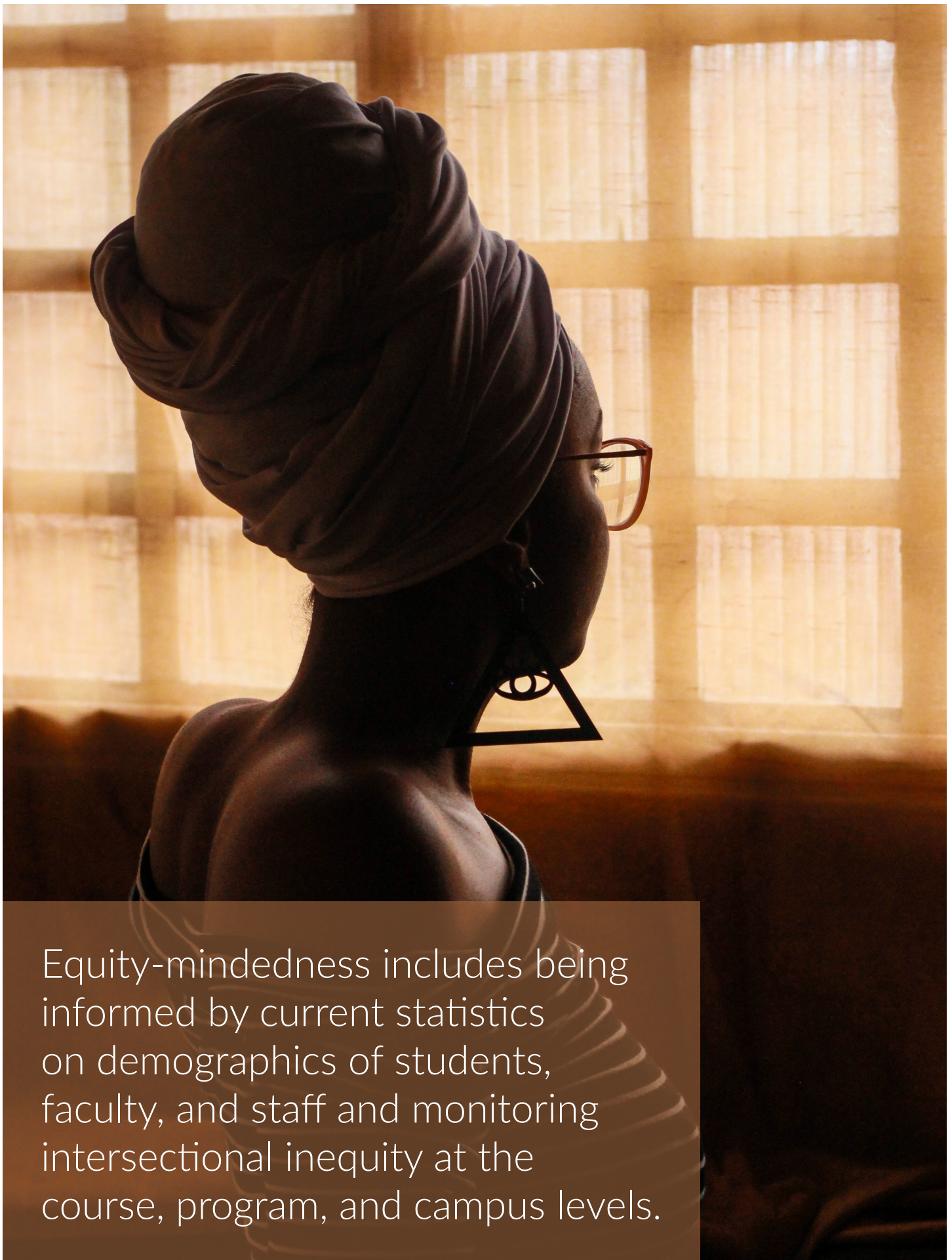
Equity-mindedness includes being informed by current statistics on demographics of students, faculty, and staff and monitoring intersectional inequity at the course, program, and campus levels.

Racially Minoritized refer to the "process [action vs. noun] of student minoritization" (Benitez, 2010, p. 131) instead of propagating the use of the culturally deficient, socially constructed, and context-specific reference "racial minorities," which minimizes people of color and preserves the prevalence of "othering."

Racism is a system of advantage based on race with systematically sanctioned racial bigotry that benefits white people, intentionally and unintentionally (Tatum, 2017).

White Fragility reflects the range of defensive reactions of white people when faced with their racialized reality, individual and collective roles in racism, and challenges to their racial innocence or racial worldviews whereby even a minimum amount of racial stress is intolerable and provokes uneasiness when confronted by their "unconscious habits of white privilege" (DiAngelo, 2018).

White Privilege is favor and power accrued from receipt of benefits, rights, and immunities characterized by unearned advantages and sense of entitlement that results in societal and material dominance by Whites over people of color (Neville, Worthington, & Spanierman, 2001).

Conclusion

The aforementioned terms are more than just nomenclature but serve as navigational signposts for institutional agents to inform and shape larger systemic thinking to amplify culturally responsive practices in and out of the classroom environment. Equity-minded educators reflect on institution-based dysfunctions, cognizant of racialized institutional structures and exclusionary practices that negatively impact access and outcomes for racially minoritized students (Bensimon, 2018). Educators cannot claim to be equity-minded yet continually apply deficit-laden prisms and practices. Equally important is multicultural self-efficacy and awareness of white privilege in considering one's role and responsibility in the production of equitable educational outcomes. Remember, we cannot move the needle on equity without a deep dive and intentional focus that calls attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes.

A precursor to getting students on a pathway as well as keeping students on the path are nuanced understandings and application of equity-minded practices.

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