Democracy's College

Episode 30: Reclaiming the Racial Justice Meaning of Equity

Announcer:	Welcome to the Democracy's College Podcast Series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students and P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrl.illinois.edu.
	In this episode, Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, at OCCRL, talks with Dr. Estela Mara Bensimon about reclaiming the racial justice meaning of equity. Dr. Bensimon is a professor of higher education at the Rossier School of Education and the director of the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California.
Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:	Here with me today for OCCRL's Democracy's College podcast is Dr. Estela Mara Bensimon, a professor of higher education at the University of Southern California with the Rossier School of Education and also serving as director of the Center for Urban Education. One which she founded in 1999.
	CUE has a singular focus on increasing racial equity and higher education outcomes for students of color. Dr. Bensimon developed the Equity Scorecard, which is a process for using inquiry to drive changes in institutional practice and culture. Her work has been widely disseminated and is pivotal in shaping and transforming considerations and practices relative to the inner sections of race within urban education in two-year and four-year campus settings.
	Dr. Bensimon, thank you so much for being with us today.
Dr. Bensimon:	Thank you for inviting me.
Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:	Well, to get started, it's been two decades since you founded the Center for Urban Education. Happy 20th anniversary to you and CUE!
Dr. Bensimon:	Thank you. Thank you that's nice.
Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:	Well, since founding the center, you have challenged the status quo institutional and structural practices that have adversely affected students of color from accessing, as well as excelling, in higher education. So, over the years, as you've impacted *thousands* of educators and taken action toward systemic change, can you share how you've aided college professionals, all of those that are from the executive- and senior-level ranks to faculty and academic advisors, and taking steps in their daily work to reverse the impact of historical and structural disadvantages that prevent student success?

Dr. Bensimon: Yes. In the work that I do at the Center for Urban Education, the approach that we have taken is that in order to be able to help colleges perform better for minoritized populations, that it is important for practitioners—and I'm using the word practitioner to refer from presidents to faculty members to staff—that they have to develop a new mental schema, a new cognitive frame.

So that rather than thinking about inequities in graduation rates and participation in STEM as having to do with the characteristics of students, that they start asking the question of, for instance, why is it that our institution performs *so* much better for white students? And what is it that we might be doing that is contributing to these racial inequities? It is not that I'm denying that students maybe sometimes come to college without the foundations to be successful, but I think that what we *don't* do as practitioners in higher education, in fact Pierre Bourdieu, the sociologist, once commented that academics are very unlikely to reflect on their own practices.

So, the way that our center has worked is to create tools, because tools are important to mediate learning, tools that enable faculty members, as well as deans and department chairs, to examine their everyday practices through the lens of racial equity. So I guess what I would say is that the way that we support institutional actors is by creating these tools, and by creating the *structure* that enables a faculty member, or teams of faculty members, like in our project in Colorado, to examine their syllabi, and to see how their syllabi, the tone of it, the rules already anticipate that students come in as potential failures, rather than as potentially successful students. And when faculty do that with the guided protocol, they *can* change not only the syllabus, but also their own ways of thinking about minoritized students. And there's much more to it, but that's the simple answer.

In our work, we are strong believers that we have to think that faculty and everyone else that we work with, that they want to do the right thing. So we start out from that premise, but they just don't know how to do it. So, our approach is a learning approach. It's providing the tools, as I said, to mediate equity mindedness, which we define in several competencies.

So, what's different about this work is that most of what we do in higher education is targeted at students. We have lots of special programs for minoritized students, and these are *good* programs, for the most part, but they start off on the premise that the students have to adapt to the campus as it is. And most campuses, except for these historically black colleges and universities, were founded by whites, for whites. So we need adaptation, not only from the perspective as tutors, but also from the institutional leaders and practitioners.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Thinking about your contacts and you being in California, California Community College System, they have a Student Success Scorecard, and over the years it's drawn a lot of praise. It's a web-based scorecard that contains some comprehensive information on student performance at each of your state's community colleges. Although the details about student outcomes have become

more accessible within the state of California, what can you offer us about what you think colleges can do in terms of the presidents? What they should do? What they can do? And respond to making sure that they advance equitable student outcomes.

Dr. Bensimon: So good. So you started out the question asking me about California, and I have to say that it was being in California, at the University of Southern California in 1995, which is the year that I arrived, that motivated me to develop an agenda that focuses on racial equity. And the reason I did that was because everyone at the time was speaking about diversity, and when you looked at California's community colleges, diversity was not their problem. They were very, very diverse. The problem was that diversity was *not* translating into transfer rates, into associate degrees, and so access was not sufficient. And so that's when I decided to focus *only* on racial equity and to think about that work. You know, in some ways the Equity Scorecard, which we created, is in a way is an accountability tool.

So, going now to your question about the community college Student Success Scorecard, I would say that that has been a good attempt to make data more transparent. Up until the scorecard, the chancellor's office would not publish data desegregated by race and ethnicity, despite many of us asking for it. So the scorecard made that data available, but they didn't make it available for all of the indicators that are in the scorecard.

The other issue is that a scorecard, in order for it to be usable, it has to have both numbers and percentages. Percentages don't mean much without the numbers. And the scorecard is *only* based on percentages. This is all to say that, actually, the scorecard is no longer going to be used in California. They're creating something that is much more institutional friendly, because those tools don't get used if they're hard to make sense of them.

But the way that I think about racial equity is that one dimension of it is accountability. And by accountability I mean that institutions should think about equity from a proportional perspective. So rather than comparing the success rates of, let's say black students or Latinx students to whites or Asians as it often is, that the indicator should be proportionality. So what I mean by that is that if you have in an institution 60% of your students are Latinx, then the expectation should be that you would see that 60% in other outcomes. For instance, if we wanted to look at the students who transferred to highly selective four-year colleges, even if there were only 20 that did so, I would expect that 60% of those 20 would be Latinx, and we don't look at data in those ways. And most of accountability instruments, nationally, do not do that.

So, I guess what I would say about California is that we *are* making many attempts, but more important than just the Student Success Scorecard is the fact that we are the *only* state that has a student equity policy for the community colleges that is actually funded. So community colleges in California have to submit a student-equity plan where they have to identify

disproportionate impact in outcomes for several groups: Race, and ethnicity is one of those groups. And they do receive funding. I mean, I think over the last couple of years $600 million dollars have already been allocated. I think I'm correct in that; I hope I'm not exaggerating. So this student equity planning, if it's done well, can be an instrument that allows community colleges to focus on race and ethnicity, and to actually establish *goals*. So for instance, in California, the chancellor's goal for transfer is that in the next four or five years, community colleges will improve their transfer rates by 35% over the baseline.

Well, one of the things that we have done at CUE, we have prepared data portfolios for colleges showing what that 35% would mean for black, Latinx students, Native Americans and so on, so that they can start establishing goals around that 35%. But the 35% itself is not enough, because if everybody goes up by 35%, you don't do away with the gaps. So we have actually created portfolios that show getting to the 35%, *and* closing the racial equity gap. And when colleges see that I need to transfer 1,000 more Latinx in order to get to that, it may *seem* daunting, but it's also a concrete goal that you can break up into four years. It's something that you can monitor.

And for me, that's what accountability is about. It's something we don't, we don't do that. We don't establish goals by race and ethnicity. So to bring this to a close, California has an anti-affirmative action ban, but the student equity policy, because it includes race and ethnicity, is one of the groups that needs to be examined for disproportionate impact, essentially gives permission to the community colleges to focus on race and ethnicity. So having that policy is very good. It doesn't always get implemented well, so one of the things that CUE has been doing, we do institutes to help community colleges actually write plans that are race conscious.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: So, can you share some examples of some of the race conscious plans, or promise and practices, and successful programs that are advancing equity? And then how might we get to the point where we could scale those up?

Dr. Bensimon: So, one of the things that we did, we just had these institutes in March, and based on the theory of our work, we believe that it is important to scaffold. So what we have done is, the reason why we created those data portfolios was because we knew that it was better for them to see it, and to see the steps that you take to make those calculations rather than just saying make 35% your goal.

So, the other component of the plan that we scaffolded is the actual plan. We created what a plan, or at least part of the plan, might look like. And the way that we started it was by saying we as a campus don't know how to do racial equity, so in order for us to address this, we need to learn the following, and we listed: We need to learn how to see microaggressions; we need to see how whiteness may be an obstacle to our racial equity work. And some of our campuses are actually taking that model, and they are using it to write their plans. And not everybody is going to be able to do that because they're going to get push back, because it was *very* explicit about whiteness, about racialization,

about institutional racism. And so that is one of the ways in which community college practitioners can begin to say we really don't know how to do this, but we're going to learn.

But what happens is that most practitioners, most leaders, most policy makers, most philanthropical organizations do not acknowledge that they don't really know what it means to perform racial equity. And so that's what we are trying to focus on and *giving* the colleges the language. I should also say, in the community colleges, there is a concentration of professionals who are themselves black, Latinx, and Native American, and also Asian American, and our work, in some ways, empowers them. They become knowledgeable on how to use data. That data portfolio was a big deal when they took it back to the campus because they could show it to the institutional researchers who usually hoard data. So they feel empowered with the language also that we give them to be able to advocate at their campuses because often the people who are doing this work, they get marginalized in the same way that students of color get marginalized.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: In your work you contend that the ultimate goal is not to just make marginal changes in policy or practices, but to have a whole paradigm shift, how we can shift campuses toward cultures of inclusion and broad ownership over racial equity. So if you could share a few insights about your thoughts on reclaiming the racial-justice meaning of equity? As you said, that is something that is very necessary.

Dr. Bensimon: So, we're all a product of our eras. So I came of age in the '60s, you know, I remember 1968 very clearly. And that was the height of not only the civil rights movement, but also the birth of the Black Panthers, the Young Lords in New York City, and that movement was very much about racial equity. It was not about diversity. And I feel like Cliff Adelman, who recently died, he once wrote an article about diversity in *Change Magazine* and he said we're whitewashing diversity. And I felt that suddenly, now, in 2018, 2017, in the year 2000 nobody talked about equity, when I started this work. In fact, it was a dirty word. It was seen as too activist. So now it has been embraced. It's everywhere.

And so, for me, the reclaiming of racial justice is to not allow for equity to be just a word or that you sprinkle like salt in a meal, and it's a *critical* term. Equity is about dismantling whiteness, and so for me the reclaiming of racial equity is to not allow the word equity to become about everything, like diversity became about everything. And to not allow it to be stripped of its critical dimension.

So, in the 1960s, we also had the culture of poverty, and we had sociologists. Patrick Monahan was also senator and Oscar Lewis, the anthropologist, and they sort of demonized the black and Puerto Rican and Mexican American communities as having this culture that was a culture that was not conducive to their success, so they had to be fixed. And we don't have the culture of poverty anymore as a language, but many of the reforms in higher education, which

tend to be structural reforms, I think have the potential to become a modern version of the culture of poverty.

In other words, we're trying to increase graduation rates for minoritized students, but those improvements are being, in many ways, designed in the same thing as culture of poverty by white minds, based on what they think the solution is. So that is one of the reasons why I wrote, I wrote an article in *Change Magazine*, which has the title "Reclaiming Racial Justice in Equity." And the term reclaiming comes from Maxine Waters, who used the term-

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Reclaiming my time.

Dr. Bensimon: Right. Exactly. To stop a white male from trying to silence her.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Auntie Maxine, reclaiming my time. So as we close, is there a call to action, or some advice you would share with our listeners in terms of engaging in and advancing racially just equitable education for diverse youth and adults?

Dr. Bensimon: I think that one call that I would make is for leaders, including minoritized leaders, including black leaders, and Latino leaders, because often they don't do this either, to start to normalize racial equity, just as we have normalized excellence, right? Or equality? Let us normalize racial equity and talk about it, talk about it directly. And don't try to use euphemisms to talk about racial groups. That's one thing.

The second thing is in order to be able to do that well, you need to be educated. And educated means reading the black and Latinx and Asian and Native American intellectuals, which often are unknown. We have all kinds of national programs of leadership development for college presidents, for new presidents, for academic vice presidents, and often the curricular-

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Yeah, that's been whitewashed too.

Dr. Bensimon: Yeah. Right. The curricular of those programs do not have a focus on racial equity as critical. And when I say racial equity as critical, I think that there needs to be a recognition of how institutionalized racism gets reproduced every day in minute ways.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: So mundane that it's not recognizable.

Dr. Bensimon: Exactly, exactly. And to stop saying to individuals who bring up those issues, you make everything about race. Actually, we make everything about whiteness, but we just don't mention it.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: As if whiteness is regular.

Dr. Bensimon:	Exactly. So I would say that. And the other is, I guess to be more *bold*, to stop being afraid to be offensive.
Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:	Some activist leadership.
Dr. Bensimon:	Yes, exactly. And then I would say to the philanthropical organizations that they can't just grab onto the word equity, but that they really need to look at themselves and how their grantmaking processes are, in fact, reproducing inequity, particularly among who gets the resources.
Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:	Wow, now that was quite the call to action. And I just really appreciate you sharing that food for thought and dropping pearls of wisdom. Again, today our guest is Dr. Estela Bensimon, professor of higher education at the USC School of Education and founding director of the Center for Urban Education. Thank you again for joining us today, Estela.
Dr. Bensimon:	Thank you so much.
Announcer:	Tune in next month when HyeJin Tina Yeo, at OCCRL, talks with Dr. Hei-hang Hayes Tang about democratizing higher education through community colleges in Hong Kong. Dr. Tang is a professor at the Education University of Hong Kong. Background music for this podcast is provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.