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*The author uses the theory and process of organizational learning to make a case for how to understand and address the cultural and structural barriers that preclude colleges and universities from producing equitable educational outcomes for students.*

## Closing the Achievement Gap in Higher Education: An Organizational Learning Perspective

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In this chapter I address one of the most urgent and intractable problems in higher education—inequality in educational outcomes for historically underserved groups—from the perspective of organizational learning theory. Historically, in the higher education research community, the study of minority students has been primarily through the lens of student development theories. (In this chapter, I use the terms *minority* and *underrepresented* interchangeably to refer to racial and ethnic groups that are experiencing the greatest achievement gaps as measured by traditional educational indicators such as attainment of the bachelor's degree: Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, Native Hawaiians, and others.) I propose that the theory and processes of organizational learning can help researchers and practitioners understand and address the structural and cultural obstacles that prevent colleges and universities from producing equitable educational outcomes. Organization learning, in both theory and practice, is particularly effective in making the invisible visible and the undiscussable discussable, two conditions that aptly describe the status of race- and ethnic-based unequal outcomes on most campuses.

Among the many factors that contribute to the invisibility of unequal college outcomes for underrepresented minorities, an obvious one is that

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the disaggregation of student outcome data by race and ethnicity (and by gender within racial and ethnic categories) is not an institutionalized practice. Institutional practices develop from and reflect the shared cognitive frames of institutional participants. Cognitive frames, also known as mental maps, represent “the rules or reasoning” that govern how individuals interpret situations and how they design and implement their actions (Argyris, 1991). Organizational learning theory can help us understand the nature of cognitive frames and the ways in which some reveal patterns of unequal outcomes, while others hide them. If patterns of inequality are invisible, they will not be discussed, and if institutional participants do not have a reason or opportunity to talk about unequal outcomes, the problem will not be addressed directly.

I am concerned here with a particular kind of organizational learning problem: the persistence of unequal educational outcomes for racial and ethnic groups with a history of past discrimination in postsecondary education. I view inequality in educational outcomes as a learning problem of institutional actors—faculty members, administrators, counselors, and others—rather than as a learning problem of students, the more typical interpretation (Garmoran and others, 2003). The problem of unequal outcomes resides within individuals, in the cognitive frames that govern their attitudes, beliefs, values, and actions. Similarly, the reduction of inequalities also lies within individuals, specifically, in their capacity to develop equity as their cognitive frame. That is, individuals whose institutional roles can influence whether students are successful or not need to learn cognitive processes that enable them to think about the situation of underrepresented students and their outcomes through the lens of equity. To put it simply, faculty members, counselors, and institutional leaders need to become equity minded. However, even if they were to consider the educational status of underrepresented students within their own institutions or departments (reflection on the educational outcomes of minorities is not a routine practice in most institutions of higher education), institutional actors are more predisposed to do so from the standpoint of diversity or deficit. Institutional actors are more likely to view diversity as a generalized characteristic of institutions and be blind to the particular circumstances of the racial and ethnic groups that constitute diversity. Or if they are or become aware of the educational status of specific racial/ethnic groups within their own campuses and departments, they are more likely to make stereotypical attributions, such as associating deficit with blacks and Hispanics and achievement with whites and Asians.

### **The Role of Individuals in Organizational Learning**

The key concepts in regard to individuals are that (1) learning is done by individuals who are members of an organizational entity such as a college or university, an administrative division, an academic department, or a research team; (2) individuals inquire into a problem collectively, on behalf

of an organizational entity ([Huber, 1991](#)); and (3) organizational culture and structures can promote or inhibit individual learning ([Argyris and Schön, 1996](#); Kezar, Glenn, Lester, and Nakamoto, 2004).

Contrary to the dominant belief that the solution to unequal educational outcomes lies in a new program or technique, somewhere out there, that has been validated as a “best practice,” I (along with my colleagues at the Center for Urban Education) believe that institutional actors, as a consequence of their beliefs, expectations, values, and practices, create or perpetuate unequal outcomes and that the possibility for reversing inequalities depends on individual learning that holds the potential for bringing about self-change. That is, individuals—the ways in which they teach, think students learn, and connect with students, and the assumptions they make about students based on their race or ethnicity—can create the problem of unequal outcomes. Such individuals, if placed in situations where they learn the ways in which their own thinking creates or accentuates inequities, can also learn new ways of thinking that are more equity minded. Individually and collectively, campus members can be the creators of the conditions that result in unequal or equitable outcomes.

**What Is a Cognitive Frame?** I use the concept of cognitive frame to describe the interpretive frameworks through which individuals make sense of phenomena. A cognitive frame is the way in which an individual understands a situation. Cognitive frames represent conceptual maps and determine what questions may be asked, what information is collected, how problems are defined, and what action should be taken ([Bensimon, 1989](#); [Bensimon and Neumann, 1993](#); [Neumann, 1989](#); [Neumann and Bensimon, 1990](#)). Understanding cognitive frames is important because at the same time that frames make some things visible, they also function as cognitive blinders in that whatever is out of frame may be imperceptible ([Bensimon, 1990](#)).

Over time, individuals develop cognitive frames that represent implicit sense-making theories to help them interpret why things are as they are. Cognitive frames are reflections of how individuals think; they represent the cognitive “rules or reasoning” they use to design and implement their actions” ([Argyris, 1991](#)). Cognitive frames are important because they help us understand the ways in which individuals can manufacture inequality, as well as reduce it.

**The Cognitive Frames of Diversity, Deficit, and Equity.** Briefly, when individuals are guided by diversity as their cognitive frame (see [Bensimon, Hao, and Bustillos, forthcoming](#), for a more expanded discussion of the three cognitive frames), they focus their attention on demographic characteristics of the student body, and view diversity in terms of interracial contact and human relations. Diversity is also viewed as an institutional characteristic that promotes learning outcomes and better prepares students for an increasingly diverse workforce and society. For example, the Supreme Court’s ruling in favor of the University of Michigan’s consideration of race as a criterion for admission to the law school is based on the premise that

universities have a “compelling interest in attaining a diverse student body” because diversity yields educational benefits, promotes cross-racial understanding, and so forth (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003).

Individuals with a deficit cognitive frame may value diversity and have positive attitudes toward increasing minority student participation in higher education, but they are inclined to attribute differences in educational outcomes for black, Hispanic, and Native American students, such as lower rates of retention or degree completion, to cultural stereotypes, inadequate socialization, or lack of motivation and initiative on the part of the students. The deficit cognitive frame is expressed in disapproving attributions such as complaining that “minority students” do not take advantage of the tutorial and academic support services the institution makes available. It can also be conveyed in well-meaning but pessimistic attributions, such as concluding that students cannot be expected to overcome the disadvantages of poverty and underpreparation; therefore, unequal outcomes are to be expected. Attributions framed by a deficit perspective imply that the academic difficulties of minority students are either self-inflicted or a natural outcome of socioeconomic and educational background. Essentially, from a deficit perspective, unequal outcomes are a problem without a solution.

Diversity-minded individuals are attuned to demographic differences; for example, they will comment on how diverse the student population is or how it lacks diversity, but more likely than not, they will be blind to the fact that the very students whose presence makes campus diversity possible are themselves experiencing unequal educational outcomes. In contrast, individuals whose beliefs and actions are guided by the deficit cognitive frame may be cognizant that their student body is diverse, and they may also be cognizant that there are racial disparities in educational outcomes, but they are impervious to the fact that they attribute the problem to the students and fail to take into account their own roles in the creation or solution of unequal outcomes. In sum, diversity-minded individuals may embrace diversity but not take into account racial achievement patterns ([Pollock, 2001](#)), and deficit-minded individuals take note of racial achievement patterns but treat them as “natural” in the light of the individuals’ cultural, socioeconomic, and educational backgrounds.

Individuals who are guided by the equity cognitive frame focus intentionally on the educational results or outcomes of black, Hispanic, and Native American students. They are color conscious in an affirmative sense. For example, they are more prone to notice and question patterns of educational outcomes, and they are also more likely to view inequalities in the context of a history of exclusion, discrimination, and educational apartheid. Most important, equity-minded individuals are far more likely to understand that the beliefs, expectations, and actions of individuals influence whether minority group students are construed as being capable or incapable. Table 8.1 compares the three cognitive frames on four dimensions: orientation, discourse, strategy, and guiding questions.

**Table 8.1. Diversity, Deficit, and Equity Cognitive Frames Compared on Four Dimensions**

	<i>Diversity Cognitive Frame</i>	<i>Deficit Cognitive Frame</i>	<i>Equity Cognitive Frame</i>
Orientation	Focus on the representation of differences (for example, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, and so on) in the student body	Focus on stereotypical characteristics associated with the culture of disadvantage and poverty	Focus on institutional practices and the production of unequal educational outcomes for minority group students
Discourse	Celebrating diversity, crossracial relationships, and color-blindness, enhancing access, cognitive and social benefits of having a diverse student body	Lack of preparation, motivation, study skills, blaming students and/or their backgrounds	Institutional responsibility for student outcomes, the manifestation of institutionalized racism, color-conscious, awareness of racialized practices and their differential consequences, awareness of white privilege
Strategies	Workshops, sensitivity training, exposing whites to the “other,” diversifying the curriculum, creating inter-cultural centers	Compensatory educational programs, remedial courses, special programs, all focused on fixing the student	Changing institutions, developing institutional accountability of equitable educational outcomes, changing individuals’ cognitive frames

In most institutions of higher education, the discourses of deficit and diversity are more likely to be heard than the discourse of equity. But the kinds of personal and institutional changes needed to eliminate the achievement gap are more likely to originate from equity thinking, which raises the following questions: In what ways can equity thinking be encouraged? In what ways might we shift individuals' cognitive frames from deficit and diversity toward equity? More to the point, what kinds of structures and processes might produce individual and collective learning that brings about equity thinking? In the section that follows, I offer ways of considering these questions, but with a caveat. Given the intractability of the problem of racial inequity in the United States, it would be foolhardy to claim a solution. Instead, what I offer is a way of thinking about the problem, one that is grounded in the theory of organization learning.

**Equity Thinking Requires Double-Loop Learning.** Argyris and Schön (1996) differentiate between two types of learning: single loop and double loop. Single-loop learners are prone to externalize problems by attributing them to forces and circumstances that are beyond their control and to resort to compensatory strategies as the treatment for problems that are perceived as dysfunctions. In single-loop learning, the focus is on reestablishing stability and normality by enacting corrections and eliminating errors. Solutions that come from single-loop learning focus on the external manifestations of the problem and leave internal values, norms, and beliefs intact—hence, the label *single loop*.

For example, individuals who have a deficit cognitive frame turn the focus of unequal outcomes away from their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to those of the students. They externalize the problem and by so doing bring their “own learning to a grinding halt” (Argyris, 1991, p. 7). To put it simply, they fail to see how changes in their own attitudes, beliefs, and practices could reverse unequal outcomes.

Double-loop learning focuses attention on the root causes of a problem and the changes that need to be made in the attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices of individuals to bring about enduring results (Bauman, 2002). Looking inward is the capacity to reflect on how practices (also beliefs and expectations) at the individual and institutional levels produce racial inequalities. In particular, according to Argyris (1991), individuals “must learn how the very way they go about defining and solving problems can be a source of the problems in its own right” (p. 2).

Simply put, the difference between single-loop and double-loop learning is that in the former, change is at a surface level, whereas in the latter, the change is in underlying norms, beliefs, and principles (Coburn, 2003). Thus, bringing about a cognitive shift from diversity to equity or from deficit to equity involves double-loop learning.

The development of equity as a cognitive frame is a double-loop learning problem because it requires the willingness of individuals (1) to make the disaggregating of data on student outcomes by race/ethnicity and gender

a routine and necessary practice to self-assess progress toward equity in educational outcomes; (2) identify equity in educational outcomes as an essential indicator of institutional performance and quality; and (3) assume responsibility for the elimination of unequal results.

### **Inquiry as a Method of Developing New Cognitive Frames**

Bringing about a cognitive shift in individuals whose dominant frames are diversity or deficit requires an approach that enables them to see, on their own and as concretely as possible, racial and ethnic patterns in educational outcomes. Over the past three years, researchers at the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education have been experimenting with such an approach. This approach, which is described in detail in other publications (Bensimon, 2004; [Bensimon, Polkinghorne, Bauman, and Vallejo, 2004](#); [www.usc.edu/dept/education/CUE](http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CUE)), is designed to create or intensify awareness of equity or inequity by organizing campus members, such as professors, counselors, and deans, into inquiry teams that have been dubbed *evidence teams* because their role is to collect data on student outcomes disaggregated by race and ethnicity and analyze them. Their purpose is to hold a mirror up to their institution that reflects clearly and unambiguously the status of underrepresented students with respect to basic educational outcomes. Through inquiry, it is expected that individuals will learn of the nature of racial patterns in educational outcomes. By "learning," I mean noticing and seeing—that is, developing an awareness that racial and ethnic patterns of inequalities exist. By "equity," I mean that the outcomes of minority group students should more closely reflect their representation in the student body (for a more technical definition, see Bensimon, Hao, and Bustillos, forthcoming). Some individuals lack complete awareness, while others have a generalized sense of them; thus, for some individuals, there is a need to develop initial awareness, and for others there is a need to intensify their awareness. The challenge is how to develop or intensify equity-oriented awareness.

The critical importance of learning new or intensified awareness is exemplified by some of the initial reactions of individuals who were appointed by their presidents to serve on campus evidence teams. For example, a dean whose president had appointed him as the leader of the campus's evidence team told us on our first meeting, "We are 100 percent diverse. The Equity Scorecard may be relevant for other institutions like yours [meaning the University of Southern California], but we don't need to do that [disaggregate]; we know what it will look like . . . for us there are no differences by ethnicity." Clearly, this individual was aware of diversity as an institutional characteristic and could not entertain the possibility that within the diversity of the student body, some racial or ethnic groups may have been experiencing more equitable educational outcomes than others.

However, it is possible that through a process of inquiry, a diversity-minded individual such as this dean can learn to think from the perspective of equity. As it happens, this individual's cognitive frame evidenced a shift toward equity. In addition, members of the evidence teams whose dominant cognitive frame was diversity initially failed to see the need for disaggregating the data, a necessary condition for double-loop learning. Although disaggregating of data is not a guarantee of double-loop learning or equity thinking, it is a necessary step.

Other individuals were generally aware of unequal results, and the inquiry process was a catalyst for intensifying it and giving the individual the impetus to act more assertively to bring about change. For example, an individual, after having seen data on outcomes disaggregated by race and ethnicity, said, "I had always felt and had a pretty good sense of the situation of minority students, but then for the first time started looking at the data, and it was just overwhelming. So, [seeing the data] has really had a tremendous impact" (unpublished field notes, Center for Urban Education).

Although most institutions routinely disaggregate enrollment data, they rarely disaggregate data on more finely grained indicators of outcomes. When the evidence teams were asked to do this, these were some of the reactions we heard:

"We track financial aid, but we don't usually disaggregate it by ethnicity and types of awards."

"No one has ever asked us to disaggregate data by ethnicity and gender, and by program and academic preparation."

"I [chair of a humanities discipline] never asked [the institutional researcher] to disaggregate the data for my department. . . . I didn't have a reason."

In sum, disaggregated data serve as the medium through which individuals learn about unequal outcomes on behalf of their campuses. The way in which data are displayed and discussed can intensify learning, confirm or refute untested hypotheses, challenge preconceived ideas, motivate further inquiry, and provide the impetus for change.

**Becoming Equity Minded.** For practitioners to realize the enormity of the problem of unequal outcomes, they have to see hard evidence for themselves. This is accomplished by scrutinizing the data, asking questions that have suddenly come to mind, and discovering patterns of student conditions that had been concealed before the data were examined. Thus, to bring about new or intensified awareness of unequal results, evidence team members are directly involved in collecting student data, talking about the information, and using it to create equity measures and benchmarks to put into an institutional self-assessment tool known as the Equity Scorecard. The scorecard provides four concurrent perspectives on institutional performance in terms of equity in educational outcomes: access, retention,



institutional receptivity, and excellence. The responsibility of the evidence teams was to create indicators of equity for each of the four perspectives. (The measures are available at <http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CUE/projects/ds/diversityscorecard.html>.)

Typically institutional researchers are responsible for gathering and analyzing data, and their findings are disseminated primarily to administrators in written reports. In order to bring the members of the evidence teams in close proximity to the problem of unequal outcomes, they are assigned the role of researchers and have the responsibility for developing and interpreting the needed equity indicators. This heightens their awareness of the issues. Faculty members and others may be generally aware that there are disparities in educational outcomes, but persuading individuals to reflect on how their own practices may be contributing to the problem is another matter. They must learn to look at the particulars of the problem within their own context.

### **Shifting from Diversity and Deficit to an Equity Cognitive Frame.**

To illustrate the process of individuals' becoming more equity-minded, I introduce two individuals, whom I refer to as Carter and Stone, both actual members of evidence teams whose language during the course of the project changed noticeably from diversity and deficit to equity. I focus on these two individuals because their initial attitude toward the project was one of skepticism and lack of enthusiasm and because it was clear that for both of them, the concept of equity in educational outcomes was new and suspect. I will describe their cognitive frames before they saw any data disaggregated by race and ethnicity and after their team began to examine and talk about disaggregated data. These descriptions are based on field notes that describe what these individuals said in the context of their participation in their campus evidence team.

Carter is the dean that I referred to earlier whose initial reaction to the Equity Scorecard was that since the campus was so diverse, it would not be very useful and that he doubted what could be learned from the process of disaggregating data. Carter was a dean at a community college that was predominantly Hispanic and also had a large number of immigrants of all races and ethnicities from nations around the world. On our first meeting with this team, Carter, despite not having seen any data, was quick to say, "We are like the UN, so for us, there is not going to be any difference by ethnicity. In fact, by the very nature of the student population, what we are likely to find is that it is all bad" regardless of the students' ethnicity or racial background. The cognitive frames that are identifiable in this brief excerpt are diversity ("we are like the UN") and deficit ("the outcomes will be bad for all").

In subsequent meetings, when the team began to look at actual outcomes data that unequivocally showed Hispanics and blacks faring much worse than whites on just about every measure of educational outcomes, Carter's language began to change. Examining a printout showing grades

earned in math courses broken down by race and ethnicity and seeing dramatic differences, he said, "I just think that there's going to be some nonpedagogical explanation, a racist explanation for lack of a better term." On the same day as he looked at data on student performance in gateway courses into the majors, he suddenly exclaimed, "Goddamit! Look at Business. There is a much higher success rate for whites than for the other groups. I bet that the reason for this is that some professors encourage particular students [high-achieving white immigrant ethnic groups] to take their course sections and give them better grades."

The point in this brief example is not whether this individual was right or wrong in attributing the inequalities he was seeing for the first time to racism. What matters is that Carter, on becoming aware of unequal outcomes, began to see the problem in ways that he had not previously considered. Rather than talking about diversity or suggesting that the differences in outcomes were a reflection of student deficits, he was considering the possibility that differences in outcomes might be attributable to individuals' unconscious practices or to institutional practices that unintentionally create circumstances that result in inequalities.

Like Carter, Stone is also in a college that is predominantly Hispanic and black, except that it is a four-year college. Before seeing data disaggregated by race and ethnicity, Stone's cognitive frame was clearly identifiable as diversity and deficit. At the outset of the project, he protested that "the Equity Scorecard focuses on remediating wrongs instead of celebrating differences." He said he would much rather "focus on how diversity is encouraged, celebrated, and welcomed" (diversity cognitive frame). At another meeting but before any data had been reviewed, he expressed a concern about the "low enrollment of Asians and whites among the first-time freshmen" and said that maybe they should be more concerned "with the dynamic of white flight" rather than with equity in outcomes (deficit cognitive frame). While this individual exhibited both diversity and deficit thinking, it was clear that deficit was his dominant cognitive frame. For example, on seeing data that Hispanics were graduating at a higher rate than whites, he commented that this was an "atypical" finding because it went against his expectation that Hispanics would do less well than whites.

After several months, this team finally began to look at disaggregated data, and once they did, Stone's language changed noticeably. For example, in looking at data that showed large gaps in the outcomes for African American students in mathematics, he said to the others on the team, "I am profoundly affected by the performance of African Americans." Had this statement been made by someone who had been identified as having an equity cognitive frame, it would not have attracted our attention. However, since up to this point Carter had been resistant to the equity-oriented aspects of the project and on different occasions had made comments that

reflected a deficit perspective, being “profoundly” affected represented a departure from his usual way of thinking. I am not suggesting that simply because Stone admitted to being “profoundly affected by the performance of African Americans,” he had experienced a sudden and dramatic shift in cognitive frames. Rather, his statement hinted at a possible change that we should watch for.

Indeed, subsequent statements demonstrated that he was undergoing a cognitive shift. For example, when one of his colleagues on the team mentioned how much had been learned by disaggregating data by race and ethnicity, Stone experienced an Aha! moment. He suddenly realized that the collaborative process of examining data served the purpose of “raising consciousness about disparities among different groups.” “We almost do a disservice by not looking at equity as a focal point,” he said. At another meeting, he spoke about the results of a faculty survey: “We conducted a faculty survey, and one item that was rated very high was the potential of our students.” “But in conversations with faculty,” it was disturbing for him to discover that despite espousing a belief in the students’ potential, “they disparage their academic quality.”

After this team began to examine data disaggregated by race and ethnicity and started discussing the clear-cut patterns of inequality that were revealed, Stone’s language shifted from diversity and deficit toward equity. The language of deficit that had been prevalent in the first year of the project was gradually replaced by discourse that reflected a growing awareness of racism and inconsistencies in what faculty espouse at an abstract level as opposed to their actual perceptions when they speak about students from particular groups.

Do these brief illustrations suggest that individuals who reflected changes in their language and interpretations become equity minded? That is, do these subtle changes in language indicate that these individuals had changed and therefore were more likely to examine their own practices? Were they now ready to spearhead change within their own institutions? At this juncture in our work, it is premature to suggest that the learning evidenced in the shifts in interpretation will systematically translate into significant and large-scale changes. In addition, I cannot rule out that Carter and Stone will not revert to diversity or deficit thinking. Ultimately what is important is whether individuals like Carter and Stone consistently act from an equity frame of mind so that it spreads throughout the institution and becomes a shared way of thinking and acting. It would be foolhardy for me to assert that this goal has been achieved. Nevertheless, our work underscores that in order to move toward the reversal of unequal higher educational outcomes, individuals who occupy positions of power and authority, like Carter and Stone, or like me and the other authors of this volume, we all need to learn to think from the standpoint of equity. Unless that happens, we are not likely to even get started.

## Conclusion

After four years of listening to and interpreting the conversations of the individuals who form the teams in the Equity Scorecard project, I believe that organizational learning, at the local level, by individuals who are closest to the problem may have a greater impact in reversing inequality in higher education than the numerous diversity-oriented interventions developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The illustrations I have shared provide a glimpse into the power of organizational learning to bring about changes in the cognitive frames of individuals. In essence, “the knowledge production itself may become the form of mobilization” that induces individuals to make the cognitive shift (Gaventa and Cornwall, 2001, p. 76) that leads to change from within the self outward to the institution.

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