

Engaging Activist Administrators on Institutional Change:

A Working Paper

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Abstract

This working paper reports findings from a study commissioned by the National Organization for Student Success's Equity, Access and Inclusion Network. In response to network members' interest in the ways that administrators support student success through equity-minded reform, the network's research taskforce members interviewed administrators regarding their understanding of *equity*, *access*, and *inclusion* in postsecondary education, and their advice for enacting equity-minded reform in U.S. college contexts. Eighteen administrators participated in interviews through a snowball sampling procedure that sought geographic representation as well as thorough understandings of the emerging themes. This working paper expands definitions of core values within postsecondary developmental education and reports on eight recommendations for college staff and faculty engaging in equity work.

Engaging Activist Administrators

Developmental education scholars note how discussions that originate outside of the field of developmental education about college equity often present the field through deficit perspectives (McGee et al., 2021; Suh et al., 2021). This framing often conflates equity with equality: critics of developmental education argue that equity requires students' equal enrollment in college-level courses without recognizing that they have not been equally prepared and do not have equal access to key resources to ensure their academic success. Moving forward, the field of developmental education requires a common understanding of key terminology for discussing equity, student success, and strategies for college reform.

To articulate such an understanding, we have examined equity-focused work undertaken by college administrators. Administrators are an essential part of their institution's organization and the larger postsecondary system, and they are recognized as representatives of the power associated with this system (Ropers-Huilman et al., 2005). We conceptualize administrators who leverage their authority and resources to enact institutional change aimed at increasing students' access to academic resources and/or their ability to succeed in college as *Activist Administrators*. Activist administrators have also done significant work to articulate the leadership strategies they use to bring about equity. For example, a growing number of administrators have committed to equity work through equity-minded leadership (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015), shared equity leadership (Kezar et. al., 2021), and other equity-focused initiatives. Recently, administrators took leading roles in the logistical planning that occurred at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic and our racialized social pandemic, which required people to reconsider how they conceptualize equity (Johnson et al., 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Administrators have access to structural and financial decision-making, and they are often very familiar with institutional

barriers to change. For these reasons, we are particularly interested in their perspectives on effective activism. However, the current literature landscape does not provide a holistic understanding of how college administrators go about *doing equity* work. This working paper began from the EAI network's—and the larger NOSS membership's—interest in how to act as change agents on one's campus.

Following an Equity, Access, and Inclusion Network (EAI) sponsored panel of Activist Administrators selected by EAI members in 2021, the authors engaged in a snowball sample to interview additional Activist Administrators across the country. This working paper addresses the research questions: How do administrators who engage in equity work on their campuses conceptualize their practice? What recommendations do they have for engaging in this work? In order to answer these questions, the participants were first asked to operationalize *equity*, *access*, *diversity*, and *inclusion*. Additionally, the administrators were asked about practical tools and strategies for practitioners and other individuals who are curious about equity work.

Framing Literature

In this section, we briefly summarize relevant literature on how college administrators work for equity-driven change, particularly literature articulating strategies used by those we call Activist Administrators, administrators who take action toward equity-focused change (Ardoin et. al., 2019; Evans, 2021; Griffin et. al, 2019; Kezar et. al., 2021). Interestingly, though, much of the literature we found on the topic of administrators and activism positioned administrators as antagonists to change (Ahmed, 2012; Ardoin et al., 2019; Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016; Ropers-Huilman et. al., 2005). This literature often portrayed administrators in tense or sometimes ambivalent relations with student activists—but, at best, as acquiescent—never as leaders. For example, in interviews with 26 student activists, Ropers-Huilman and colleagues

(2005) found that student activists described administrators as “gatekeepers, antagonists, supporters, and absentee leaders” (p. 295).

Recent scholarship, however, provides rich frameworks for understanding the positions of activist administrators (Evans, 2021; Griffin et. al., 2019; Kezar et. al., 2021; Kezar et al. 2011; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). Kezar and colleagues define *shared equity leadership* as a collective of individuals “undertaking a *personal journey toward critical consciousness*, who share *values* that promote equity, and understand and enact specific *practices* to promote more just and equitable outcomes” (Kezar et al., 2021, p. 7, italics original). They draw upon Dowd and Bensimon’s (2015) formulation of *equity-minded leadership* as being both compassionate and collaborative, meaning that equity-minded leaders both acknowledge difference (particularly within the context of historical marginalization) and intentionally incorporate diverse perspectives in coalition building.

The existing literature on activist administrators illustrates three key points. First, *activist administrators’ equity work often begins in personal experiences of marginalization and/or reckonings with their own privilege* (Ardoin et. al., 2019; Evans, 2021; Kezar et. al., 2021; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). This self-reflexiveness offers activist administrators a personal clarity of purpose and nuanced understanding of the institutionalization of inequity. Second, *activist administrators understand the hybrid and sometimes politically frustrating nature of activist work from inside structures of power and racism* (Griffin et. al, 2019): what some have described as a “constant back and forth between your head and your heart” (Griffin et al., 2019, p. 683). Ultimately, though, as noted in the third point emerging from the literature, *activist administrators find a unique efficacy in their hybrid position* as “both change agent and organizational insider” to amplify marginalized voices and to create policy that serves them

(Ardoín et al., 2019, p. 39). Indeed, several studies point to the efficacy of administrator influence in creating antiracist college policy (Patton & Bondi, 2015; Tevis & Foste, 2022; Welton et al., 2018). For example, Stulberg & Chen (2014) report that in at least seventeen colleges, the development of race-conscious affirmative action was led by “the moral and ideological beliefs of key administrators” (p. 36). This growing body of scholarship indicates the key role activist administrators can play in initiating equity-focused reform.

Methodology

In our initial pilot study of 18 administrators’ enactment of justice-oriented institutional change, we applied thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013) to uncover eight impactful practices and lessons learned. To amplify the meanings activist administrators applied to their experiences, the research team utilized thematic analysis, a rigorous qualitative methodology for exploring topics which lack previous thorough coverage in the scholarly literature (Creswell, 2015).

Findings

We present eight strategies for activist administrators and other equity-minded educators. These findings are presented with quotes and stories from our respondents. Each is followed by a list of concrete action items for emerging activists and those continuing on their equity journey.

Hold Humility

Particularly for administrators working with staff and faculty, *humility* is an important point for initiating conversations and change oriented around equity and justice. For these administrators, humility requires recognizing one’s ongoing need to learn more about, with, and from others. Angelica explained, “Start with the concept of humility. You know, ‘Please, I have more to learn.’ Whether it’s about culture, whether it’s about the actual histories that people are

trying to tell us have happened. . . . Just, are you willing to learn, are you willing to listen?” At the same time, humility also referred to creating a sense of welcome and authentic interest in learning from others: “We can no longer not have these discussions, we have to talk about ‘What do we do? What do we need to do? What do we need to have in place? What do we need to not just say, but act on so that our faculty, staff and students feel welcome, that they feel supported, that they feel they can be successful?’” (Roxanne). As described by the administrators, humility was a dispositional orientation towards openness. This recommendation closely aligns with the cultural humility framework (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998) and includes critical self-reflection, challenges to power imbalances, and institutional accountability (Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998).

How Can Developmental Educators Hold Humility?

- Engage in a continuous cycle of self-reflection.
- Make space for dialogue and international conversations with colleagues and students.
- Participate equitably in conversations (i.e., make space for historically underrepresented voices and perspectives).

Be Intentional and Articulate in Your Purpose

Shaniece explained the importance of being intentional and articulate:

We talk about what we want to do, when we want to do, and how we want to do it, who's going to do it. But we don't really spend time building that foundation of why something is important.... It's important for you to figure out your why, ‘Why are we doing this,’ because if you can't articulate why you're doing something, then it's going to be hard to get people to want to get on board with what you're doing and buy into what you're doing.

Roxanne spoke to the difficulty of and importance in being intentional and articulate by stating, “When I do get pushback, or I do struggle with buy-in, it becomes how can I get this person on board; it becomes a ‘by any means necessary’ type of thing.” Intentionally choosing the conversations you have and the people you engage with is an important part of activist work (Newton, 2011; Stetsenko, 2014).

How Can Developmental Educators Intentionally Articulate Purpose?

- Drive your actions by your values.
- Promote a clear agenda.
- Build coalitions with others.

Acknowledge the Pain Along with the Purpose

When doing activist work, it is important to acknowledge the pain along with the purpose for promoting equity. Shaniece, for example, explained, “If you're really serious about justice and equity, you have to be willing to put a whole lot of stuff on the line. This is not for the faint at heart.” Working through pain is a challenging aspect of altering structural inequities. In acknowledging this difficulty, Derrick discussed the imperative of strategic planning related to the purpose of equity work: “I think it's important for you to figure out your why like, why, why are we doing this, because if you can't articulate why you're doing something, then it's going to be hard to get people to want to get on board with what you're doing and buy into what you're doing.” Culturally responsive and personal responses can act as a source of collective inspiration for those engaging in equity work (Bal et al., 2018).

How Can Developmental Educators Acknowledge Pain and Purpose?

- Know and hold firm your limits for the supporting the cause.
- Identify a source of strength to draw upon during times of adversity.

- Develop ways to process the painful experiences (e.g., journaling).

Use Your Data

Several interviewed activist administrators spoke to the importance of using your data from an equity perspective: “I would define equity as taking a look at the data, taking a look at all of the different factors, everything that goes into the list of a student. . . . I’m talking about looking at a student’s socioeconomic status, whether or not they have transportation, whether or not they have food, whether they are homeless or not” (Derrick). Similarly, Prima focused on the stakeholders of equity research, “It’s really, really critical when we look at our student data, and when we look at even our faculty data, that there is an institutional strategy to make strides to take action that is transparent and accountable.” Effective utilization of data provides a framework for administrators to base institutional and systemic initiatives, which engages social concepts like transformative leadership practices, where “faculty serve as agents of societal transformation” (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 34).

How Can Developmental Educators Use Data?

- Dedicate time (e.g., 60 min) every week for familiarizing yourself with your institutional data and strategizing how it can inform your practice.
- Seek student input regarding the college’s growth edges (i.e., find out from students what their needs are).
- Collectively discuss and problem-solve challenges emerging from concerning data points with faculty and staff.

Collaborate and Create Community

Activist administrative work draws power from collaboration, especially active community-building inclusive of the campus’s most vulnerable groups—amplifying the voices,

for example, of students from marginalized communities, contingent faculty, and maintenance, administrative, and food service workers. Derrick noted, “All parties should be involved in any of the decision making, or conversation, at least, opening the door for everyone to have a voice now whether or not it is accepted.” In addition, Prima emphasizes the importance of reaching out to the families of students of color. “College is a family decision for many communities of color ... And it is part of the assets we bring. Because the support that many communities, first-gen communities of color get from their parents, we know, either makes or breaks the experience for many.” We have the choice, Prima points out, to “really keep that intergenerational college knowledge going.” Further, the literature suggests that a college community actively seeking to center its minoritized populations flourishes as a whole. Thirolf & Woods (2017), for example, find that community colleges’ treatment of part-time faculty affects student success. Similarly, Huamani Jimenez et al. (2021) describe the way the Rutgers Food Pantry, generally used only by food-insecure students, became a resource as well for previously food-secure students during the COVID-19 pandemic. A community continually engaging in acts of inclusion becomes what Martin Luther King, Jr. and Josiah Royce termed beloved community, a community, in Royce’s words, based on “the goal of rendering as full and as definite as possible all the conscious life that at any moment comes within the circle of our influence” (as cited in Jensen, 2016).

How Can Developmental Educators Create Community?

- Seek out the perspectives of contingent faculty, maintenance and administrative staff, and students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, to inform decision-making about scheduling, course offerings, and student-facing policies.
- Explicitly define jargon and workplace-specific lingo when asking for feedback on current policies and working conditions.

- Create participation opportunities for students' families and the local community, centering the families of first-generation college students and students of color.
- Articulate how inclusion benefits everyone, including non-marginalized groups.

Build Motivation for Participation

Activist administrators can create buy-in from faculty and staff through inclusive decision-making processes with opportunities for participation and feedback. Roxanne asserted that productive work often happens through “minor changes that can make a big difference” with faculty and staff who are between “advocates” and “dissenters.” These professionals are “the vast majority of folks in the middle who can be convinced one way or the other.” Roxanne further explained why inclusive working conditions lead to buy-in for participating in equity work: “If we . . . create an environment where people feel welcome, where they belong, where they know that they're going to be successful; and if they're not successful, they know that there's someone or some agency, some department there that will help them you know...it creates this this sense of well-being, of being cared for.” These examples illustrate why effective activist work goes beyond supporting students to incorporate inclusive processes and working conditions that support both those who are already engaged in activist work and those who are invited to participate (Cole, 2008).

How Can Developmental Educators Motivate Participation?

- Seek feedback on program changes from all stakeholders.
- Create opportunities for stakeholders to participate in change making.
- Don't discount incremental changes in moving toward equity.

Practice Intentional, Strategic Emotion

One of the ways that the interviewed activist administrators sustained their engagement in this activist work was by being emotionally strategic. For example, Derrick explained his reluctance to engage in emotional work by stating, “One of the things that I learned was to not engage . . . in [the] emotional . . . and to not take it personal.” Derrick also explained, “I have to channel that emotion, that burning fire, into a more concentrated, fact-based approach which requires me to play chess . . . with my coworkers to understand who I’m dealing with, who our allies are, who are advocates for change.” The strategy by which Derrick demonstrated to others his emotional investment in the work allowed him to stay focused on the desired outcome rather than the emotional responses to the work. Further, for activist administrators who have personally experienced discrimination and disadvantage, this intentional emotion work allows activist administrators to define their own experiences and to choose the extent to which they want to bring their marginalized identities into the discussion.

How Can Developmental Educators Practice Strategic Emotion?

- Act out of strategy, not fear, anger, or anxiety.
- Consider all possible options before choosing how to respond.
- When emotions arise, find a way to channel that energy for your own gain.

Responding to Resistance

Shaniece responded that sometimes equity-minded educators have to give space so other educators can find their place in this work at their own pace. This proves to be a challenge that produces resistance in administrators because of a “fear of loss of status, time, power, or traditional symbols” (Lane, 2007, p.86). Keeping open lines of communication and maintaining inclusive spaces allows those ‘on the fence’ to get behind social justice work as they grow and develop as purveyors of knowledge *and* justice. Angelica suggested activating allies and finding

spokespersons *willing* to do the work, “The most effective way I’ve been able to do this is to involve other people [to speak as experts in my place] . . . it’s not delivered by me, so that way what it is I would like to convey I don’t have to worry about it being that I said it.” This form of activism creates a community of enhancement and amplification where voices and ideas are acknowledged and potentially considered when they may have been otherwise resisted.

How Can Developmental Educators Respond to Resistance?

- Allow time and space for others to join at their own pace; form open communities of like-minded professionals.
- Keep open lines of communication by maintaining inclusive spaces and forming professional collaborations, both within and external to your institution.
- Protect your own peace by practicing individual and professional resilience methods such as using resistance as a motivator or reflecting on the positive impacts of justice work.

Conclusion: Additional Recommendations

This working paper resulted from a charge by the NOSS Equity, Access, and Inclusion network to explore the ways that activist administrators engage in equity work in postsecondary educational spaces. Recognizing that developmental education is a comprehensive system of student support (Armstrong, 2020; Boylan, 2009; Suh et al., 2021), the network intentionally sought to interview activist administrators in a range of administrative roles in two and four-year postsecondary institutions. The working paper examined eight strategies that are applicable to developmental educators who seek to strengthen their work as activist administrators and equity-minded educators.

Although the work paper presents these strategies as discrete, there were several overlapping best practices that ought to be highlighted. First, it is important to learn different and

more efficient ways to communicate. This means that it is important to engage in dialogue with those who you may not agree with, and it is a form of resistance to keep the lines of communication open with individuals who are not yet on the equity train. Second, it is important to build community with those around you. The work of activists is taxing, and the support of others makes a profound difference, as described by the activist administrators who informed this work. Finally, it is important for activists to understand their actions within their institutional context. In knowing the short and long term gameplan, and the rationale for said plan, activists can most impactfully and sustainably engage in this essential work.

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