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Taking equity-mindedness to the next level: the equity-minded organization

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University and college leaders have an espoused interest in racial equity. In recent years, university and college leaders have invested in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training that focuses on developing individual attributes that reflect equity-mindedness. For example, DEI training efforts have often been focused on helping faculty develop critical race consciousness by raising their awareness of systemic racism in their routine teaching, mentoring, and hiring practices. However, in many cases, DEI training and equity change efforts primarily focus on individual-level change without critically identifying, disrupting, and transforming organizational processes and policies that perpetuate structural racism. In this paper, we synthesized research on race, organizations, and equity-mindedness to argue that racial equity change efforts should aspire to transform universities and colleges into equity-minded organizations. At the organizational level, equity-mindedness has the potential to structure organizational behavior, shape policy development, and frame practitioner and leader understandings of organizational equity issues in ways that are more aligned with their commitments to equity and justice. Through an analysis of higher education equity change efforts, we introduce a framework for equity-minded organizations. Theorizing equity-mindedness at the organizational level creates opportunities for university leaders, stakeholders, and researchers to move beyond the traditional prose of commitments to DEI to the design of programs, policies, and practices that can lead to more lasting structural changes.

KEYWORDS

racial equity, organizational change, racialized organizations, equity-mindedness, higher education

Introduction

In 2020, the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police officers drew attention to and increased support for the Black Lives Matter movement's demands to transform institutions across society. The demands for institutional transformation led college and university leaders to espouse commitments to advance racial equity (Anand and Hsu, 2020; Keaton and Cooper, 2022; Rodgers and Liera, 2023). Racial equity has two dimensions. The first dimension conceptualizes race as a system of power (Dowd and Bensimon, 2015). The second dimension emphasizes the accountability to transform policies, practices, and norms that reproduce inequity into policies, practices, and norms that sustain equitable experiences, processes, and outcomes (Bensimon and Malcolm, 2012; Dowd and Bensimon, 2015). In practice, for higher education racial equity change work

to have the desired impact, organizational change efforts must be focused on disrupting the status quo and dismantling racialization processes that have become deeply embedded and taken for granted over time (McCambly and Colyvas, 2023). For example, racial equity change work must ask administrators and faculty leaders to disrupt and change practices that elevate white people's values and experiences while excluding the values and experiences of People of Color. The history of higher education is full of examples where individual standards (e.g., admission standards) and performance expectations (e.g., hiring criteria) were racialized and designed to facilitate the exclusion of racially minoritized groups (Patton, 2016; Price, 2019; Garcia, 2023; Poon et al., 2023).

In recent years, university and college leaders have invested in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training that focuses on developing individual attributes that reflect equity-mindedness. For example, DEI training efforts have often been focused on helping faculty develop critical race consciousness by raising their awareness of systemic racism in their routine teaching, mentoring, and hiring practices (Ching, 2018; Liera, 2020b; Onyeador et al., 2021). However, in many other cases, higher education DEI training primarily focuses on individual-level change without critically identifying, disrupting, and transforming organizational processes and policies that perpetuate structural racism (Gonzales et al., 2021). Racial equity efforts that solely focus on changing individual mindsets (Liera, 2023a) or inequities in outcomes without dismantling the modes of production that maintain racialization will fall short in transforming organizations in ways that will lead to improved outcomes for minoritized groups (McCambly and Colyvas, 2023).

We focus on organizational processes because they position us to understand how racialized change work can transform universities and colleges into equity-minded organizations [see McCambly and Colyvas (2023) for a thorough description of racialized change work]. At the organizational level, equity-mindedness has the potential to structure organizational behavior, shape policy development, and frame practitioner and leader understandings of organizational equity issues. Through an analysis of higher education racial equity change efforts, we introduce a framework for equity-minded organizations. Theorizing equity-mindedness at the organizational level creates opportunities for university leaders, stakeholders, and researchers to move beyond the prose of campus DEI efforts to the design of programs, policies, and practices that can lead to more lasting structural changes. We begin this piece with a discussion of the scholarship on equity-mindedness, DEI organizational change in higher education, and racialized organizations. In doing so, we set the foundation for our conceptualization of the equity-minded organization.

Equity-mindedness

The concept of equity-mindedness has grown in prominence over the last 20 years. Estela Bensimon coined the concept of equity-mindedness to describe the cognitive schema that administrators, faculty, and staff need to develop to address racial inequity on their campuses. Equity-mindedness refers to individuals having the knowledge to be conscious of race; being aware that racialized patterns are embedded in university policies, practices, and norms; using data disaggregated by race and ethnicity to identify

racial equity gaps in their practice; and taking responsibility for changing policies, practices, and norms that sustain racial inequity (Bensimon and Malcolm, 2012; Dowd and Bensimon, 2015). According to Bensimon, there are at least five equity-minded attributes. Equity-minded administrators and faculty members (a) understand the accountability and critical dimensions of equity; (b) reframe race-based inequities as a problem of practice and view their elimination as an individual and collective responsibility; (c) encourage critical race consciousness; (d) reflect on organizational practices and aim to make them more culturally relevant, and (e) strategically navigate resistance to equity efforts and aim to build buy-in among colleagues (Center for Urban Education, 2019). We suggest that an equity-minded organizational lens allows administration and faculty leaders to centralize racial equity in the design of programs, policies, and practices that can lead to more lasting structural changes advancing racial equity change work (Bensimon and Malcolm, 2012; Dowd and Bensimon, 2015; McNair et al., 2020).

Although interest in higher education leaders and practitioners becoming equity-minded has grown, McNair et al. (2020) remind us that in the process of becoming equity-minded most higher education leaders and practitioners often fail to develop critical race consciousness to understand the historical influence of whiteness on structural racism. Ching (2018) found that tensions in faculty developing lasting equity-mindedness were not uncommon. Faculty members who ideologically link equity with fairness and equality experience barriers in developing lasting equity-mindedness (Ching, 2018). Other scholars have contended that agency is a necessary precursor in applying equity-mindedness to negotiate and navigate power systems (e.g., whiteness) towards changing organizational processes (Liera and Dowd, 2019; Liera, 2020a). The identities and values of higher education leaders and practitioners also influence their attitudes about advocating for DEI (Park and Denson, 2009). Higher education leaders and practitioners must not only believe in their ability to be equity-minded in different areas of their work, but they must also be willing to engage in activities that intellectually and emotionally challenge them (Liera, 2020b, 2023a; Haynes, 2023).

DEI organizational change

In many colleges and universities, diversity is ideological and functions as a "system of meaning, concepts, categories, and representations" that are institutionally specific and time bound (Hall, 1980, p. 334). Diversity ideology is often proliferated discursively and worthy of study and critique because it is often embodied and enacted by individuals within university communities through their everyday practice (Warikoo, 2016; Nelson et al., 2021). Scholars have argued that in many organizations and corners of society, diversity ideologies or discourses are "happy talk," which frame diversity in ways that normalize and center whiteness without ever acknowledging oppression (Ahmed, 2006; Bell and Hartmann, 2007; Berrey, 2015). Many higher education institutions engage in this sort of "happy talk" or a "culture of niceness" (Liera, 2020b) when they fail to regularly examine how their own day-to-day routines naturalize inequity, diminish the agency of subordinate groups, and decouple their commitments to equity from everyday practice (Ray, 2019).

The pervasiveness of happy talk in educational organizations has been documented by scholars studying DEI change initiatives. For instance, Berrey (2015), in *The Enigma of Diversity*, described how rhetorical shifts in descriptions of diversity at the University of Michigan (i.e., from redress of past injustice to the educational benefits of diversity) led to a shift in the types of policies and practices that the administrators adopted. While these policies contributed to an increase in the numerical representation of students from marginalized groups, these practices failed to address critical structural issues at the University of Michigan that could change institutional opportunity structures or resource distribution processes. Thomas (2018) work on diversity change initiatives revealed how organizational commitments to diversity can reify existing inequalities by failing to pay attention to organizational policies and practices that contribute to the reproduction and maintenance of inequality.

Higher education organizations rarely create space for individuals to reflect critically on the myriad ways their organizational policies, practices, and programs may contribute to the reproduction and maintenance of inequality (Wooten and Couloute, 2017; Wooten, 2019; Amis et al., 2020). Colleges and universities have unique practices, language, and norms embedded within their organizational culture that adheres to the different ways they think about and execute diversity work (Kezar, 2014). These cultural differences challenge campus administrators and faculty leaders to scale racial equity efforts across campus in ways that focus on reducing resistance (Byrd, 2022). Contextual factors (e.g., political climate, organizational identity, etc.), previous experiences, and current situations inform people's perceptions of their ability to pursue equity-minded goals and objectives (Campbell and O'Meara, 2014; Gonzales, 2014; Byrd, 2022). These contextual factors also condition behavior in ways that make improvisation and innovation a challenging effort for equity-minded change agents (DiMaggio, 1997).

Racialized organizations

The racial hierarchy of college and university organizations shapes the ability to plan and accomplish racial equity change efforts because of who has historically held as well as who continues to hold positions with decision-making power. Higher education as a field is often touted as a bastion of progression, especially on campuses that champion racial equity but the lack of racial diversity among students, faculty, and senior administrators contradicts such espoused racial equity values (Thomas, 2018; American Council of Education [ACE], 2023). Moreover, higher education has a history of segregating People of Color into positions with minimal to no decision-making power. For example, most university and college presidents have professional backgrounds in academic leadership positions (e.g., provost, deans, department chairs; American Council of Education [ACE], 2023). Academic leadership positions provide people with valued leadership experience, but most academic presidential pathways are often exclusive to tightly-knit white social networks (American Council of Education [ACE], 2023; Bensimon and Associates, 2023a).

As racialized organizations, colleges and organizations shape the agency of administrators, faculty, and staff through the unequal distribution of resources based on racial group membership (Ray, 2019, 2022). Tenured full professors have the legitimacy and status among faculty peers to access leadership positions and garner respect to make high-impact decisions (Griffin, 2020). Yet, most tenured full professors are white men who often hoard leadership opportunities for their social networks (Griffin, 2020). Ray (2019) posited that racialized organizations enhance or diminish agency through the unequal distribution of resources, assign value to whiteness as a credential, and the decouple racial policy from practice. From this premise, we posit that an equity-minded organizational frame can potentially re-couple commitments to equity with everyday policy and practice by disrupting the use of race-evasive organizational frames which often undergird the DEI initiatives of racialized organizations (Patton et al., 2019; Liera and Hernandez, 2021; Rodgers and Liera, 2023).

Equity-minded organizations

Drawing from Dowd and Bensimon's (2015) principles of equity-mindedness and Ray's (2019) work on racialized organizations, we offer practitioners, researchers, and policymakers a framework for equity-minded organizations. Equity-mindedness as an organizational characteristic can be thought of as an interpretive frame that facilitates meso-level organizational thought and action. This meso-level interpretive frame helps organizations define problems, regulate activity, structure interactions, and shape how organizations and their members make sense of their environment (Giddens, 1984; McCambly and Colyvas, 2023). Our theorization of equity-minded organizations takes an organization as social actor approach to understanding equity change work in higher education organizations (Geser, 1992; King et al., 2010; McCambly and Colyvas, 2023).

In Table 1, we describe equity-mindedness as an organizational characteristic and provide examples of how educational organizations challenge the status quo by deconstructing and redesigning organizational structures, policies, and practices in ways that (a) enhance the agency of racially minoritized groups; (b) redistribute resources with the intention of disrupting white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and anti-indigeneity that are deeply embedded in racialized organizations; (c) delegitimize whiteness as a credential by recognizing and integrating the experiences and knowledge of racially minoritized groups; and (d) are attuned to the structural disadvantages experienced by members of minoritized groups. Many of the equity-minded organizations described in Table 1 also conduct continuous systematic self-assessments of their outcome data to ensure the effectiveness of their programs, policies, and practices (see Garcia (2023) for a theorization of the transformation of Hispanic-Serving Institutions [HSIs] into equity-minded organizations).

Equity-minded organizations use their authoritative (e.g., control of personnel) and allocative (e.g., financial, physical space) resources to establish new routines, ideologies, and structures that are more aligned with their espoused commitments to equity (Giddens, 1984; McCambly and Colyvas, 2023). One way that equity-minded higher education organizations can utilize their authoritative and allocative power to enhance the agency of subordinated groups is by employing a critical mass of

TABLE 1 Examples of equity-minded organizational attributes in practice.

Equity-minded organization attribute	Example of revised organizational practice	Example from literature
Enhance the agency of racially minoritized groups and racially conscious staff	Design organizational roles (e.g., equity advocates) who are empowered to identify biases and discriminatory practices present in routine organizational processes and who can take action/make recommendations that will advance equitable outcomes.	Hispanic-Serving Institutions enhance the agency of racially minoritized groups by assessing, auditing, and transforming general education curriculum to address both social justice pedagogical goals and content pedagogical goals (Garcia, 2023).
Redistribute resources with the intention of disrupting inequitable outcomes	Disaggregate and analyze outcome data, and reassign time, personnel, and financial resources in ways that are intentionally designed to improve outcomes for minoritized groups	The University of Texas at Austin developed the Longhorn Opportunity Scholars program, which directed off-campus recruitment resources to high schools that served high concentrations of students from low-income or racially minoritized groups. This redistribution was designed to disrupt inequitable enrollment outcomes for racially minoritized groups (Andrews et al., 2020).
Delegitimize whiteness as a credential	Assess how screening and hiring committees define and apply their understandings of merit and fit. Specifically, assess whether definitions of merit and fit centralize whiteness and hold screening and hiring committees accountable to use equity-mindedness to define merit and fit.	Screening and hiring committees delegitimize whiteness as a credential by using evaluation criteria that centralize presidential candidates' understanding of institutionalized racism, their experience with addressing campus racial climate in substantive ways, and the design of policies and initiatives informed by data disaggregated by race (Bensimon and Associates, 2023b).
Are attuned to the structural disadvantages experienced by members of minoritized groups	Engage in critical dialogue that surfaces the ways that routine organizational tasks, processes, and policies disadvantage minoritized groups. This deconstruction process will identify implicit theories, frames, and narratives that can be disrupted when reconstructing tasks, processes, and policies in ways that advance equity.	The University of Michigan office of admissions designed an admission rubric that attempted to disentangle the connection between race and admission to the University of Michigan by formally recognizing the structural disadvantages faced by racially minoritized students applying to the university (Hirschman and Bosk, 2020).

individuals from racially minoritized groups into positions with the authority to influence organizational processes and procedures. Higher education organizations should create equity advocate leadership positions that require experience with racial equity change work and evidence of equity-mindedness to serve in these roles (see Bensimon and Associates (2023b) and Liera (2023b) for examples of criteria to hire equity-minded presidents and faculty members, respectively). The incorporation of equity-minded leaders in academic and administrative units is one approach that leaders may leverage to enhance the agency of minoritized groups. The equity advocate role draws from research in the improvement of organizational decision-making (Schwenk and Cosier, 1980) that recognizes that individuals who are assigned to roles which are formally responsible for challenging group decision-making can lead to better outcomes. Individuals who serve as equity advocates are empowered (via formal responsibilities outlined in their position descriptions) to identify biases present in routine organizational processes and institute practices that advance organizational equity (Liera, 2020a). For example, at a private liberal arts university, equity advocates on faculty search committees relied on search chairs and the provost supporting their roles to integrate active recruitment strategies, race-conscious language on job announcements, and evaluation criteria to evaluate faculty candidates' equity-mindedness and DEI experiences.

Equity-minded organizations can disrupt the status quo by utilizing their allocative power to redistribute resources in ways that will improve outcomes for minoritized groups. The University of Texas at Austin provides a tangible example of how universities

can allocate resources in ways that might advance equity. In 1997, after the state adopted an affirmative action ban, the University of Texas developed the Longhorn Opportunity Scholars program, which directed off-campus recruitment resources to schools that served high concentrations of students from low-income or racially minoritized groups (Andrews et al., 2020). The focused allocation of recruitment resources resulted in an 81% increase in the enrollment of students from targeted high schools.

Hirschman and Bosk's (2020) research on the University of Michigan's college admissions review system is an example of an organizational process that was designed to intentionally delegitimize whiteness as credential. This admission program sought to eliminate the bias found in the assessment measures typically used by undergraduate admission decision makers by designing an evaluation rubric that institutionalized their commitment to equity via policy and practice. The statisticians that built the Michigan admissions program recognized the structural inequalities present in routine selection decisions and attempted to disentangle the connection between race and admission to the University of Michigan with the design of a new evaluation rubric. In another example, Villarreal (2022) described how racially conscious HSI's delegitimize whiteness as a credential through their design of faculty hiring processes that understood and valued the experiences of Latinx students. In these selection processes, faculty search chairs prioritized candidates who understood the university's open-access practices and were committed to excellence in mentorship and research opportunities.

The examples provided above also describe equity-minded institutional processes that were attuned to the structural

disadvantages experienced by individuals from marginalized groups. In each process, university administrators were empowered and encouraged by their organizations to develop policies and practices that would advance equity. The leaders of these organizations provided legitimacy for these newly developed practices by communicating their unwavering support of DEI initiatives that would improve outcomes for minoritized groups (Kezar et al., 2008; Berrey, 2015; McCambly and Colyvas, 2023).

Discussion

Higher education institutions, if strategically and intentionally redesigned, can disrupt the status quo of white supremacy. In this article, we offered a theorization of the attributes and practices of equity-minded organizations. Integrating equity-mindedness within racialized organizations creates opportunities for university leaders, stakeholders, and researchers to move beyond the prose of campus DEI efforts to the design of programs, policies, and practices that can lead to more lasting structural changes. In an equity-minded organization, racialized change work disrupts organizational processes and practices that marginalize and exclude oppressed groups by (a) enhancing the agency of racially minoritized groups and racially conscious staff; (b) redistributing resources with the intention of disrupting white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and anti-indigeneity that are deeply embedded in racialized organizations; (c) delegitimizing whiteness as a credential

by recognizing and integrating the experiences and knowledge of racially minoritized groups; and (d) attuning to the structural disadvantages experienced by members of minoritized groups.

Author contributions

Both authors equally contributed to the manuscript.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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