

Strategic Planning at Winston-Salem State University: Working Toward Equity

The terms equality and equity are often used interchangeably; however, they differ in important ways. Equality is typically defined as treating everyone the same and giving everyone access to the same opportunities. Meanwhile, equity refers to proportional representation (by race, class, gender, etc.) in those same opportunities. To achieve *equity*, policies and procedures may result in an *unequal* distribution of resources. For example, need-based financial aid reserves money specifically for low-income students. Although unequal, this is considered equitable because it is necessary to provide access to higher education for low-income students.

Financial aid policies alone cannot ensure equity in higher education. The disadvantages facing low-income and minority students go well beyond access to financial resources. Inequity in education begins long before a student reaches campus. In fact, it often begins with pre-K education. Students from low-income homes are less likely to have access to pre-K programs, and those who do often have less-qualified teachers. This disparity continues throughout their educational experiences, with less access to opportunities such as advanced placement courses, college-preparatory math and science classes, and experiences such as internships. Additionally, teachers in schools with large populations of low-income students are often under-qualified or less experienced. All of these challenges result in obstacles for students.

While both low-income and minority students face these obstacles, the causes differ. For example, African-American students – regardless of their social class – suffer from racial inequality as a result of 250 years of slavery, 90 years of Jim Crow and 60 years of “separate but equal.” While public education is free for all citizens, a history of discriminatory practices has resulted in inferior education for minority students.

Meanwhile, low-income and first-generation college students – regardless of race – have limited access to high-quality academic experiences and often lack the knowledge needed to navigate the college admissions and financial aid processes. Because they are the first in their family to attend college, acronyms, processes and policies that we assume all students understand may become stumbling blocks that cause them to have an inferior college experience – or even drop out.

As part of its strategic planning process, Winston-Salem State University is keeping equity-mindedness top-of-mind. As the strategic plan for the next five years is developed, WSSU will intentionally develop practices and programs that ensure that the campus supports the success of *all* students.

This will require us to be aware of and to consider the challenges and obstacles facing low-income, first-generation and minority students and to craft policies, procedures and programs that serve to better assist students dealing with those challenges. We must examine the language we use in our daily work (from syllabi to course catalogs to advising materials) while being mindful of our students' backgrounds and experiences. We must reform policies and practices to result in more equal outcomes – not just teach students how to navigate our current policies and practices.

Ultimately, equitable policies and procedures are designed to accommodate differences in students' life circumstances, educational experiences and goals. The disparities we see today are too complex to be addressed with after-the-fact strategies. Rather, equity must be a defining quality of the policies and practices we develop – and our strategic goals must reflect our desire for equity, rather than equality.