

# Equity Tank: A Model for Critical Inquiry and Change

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While many student affairs departments are committed to addressing equity issues, they face limited capacity and lack institutionalized frameworks to implement equitable change at all levels on a cyclical and proactive basis. Equity Tank, a four-phase interactive model, allows all members of a department to question its policies, practices, and procedures to consider how they may negatively impact marginalized communities. Grounded in two practice models, the Equity Scorecard (Bensimon, 2012) and an Equity-Minded Inquiry graduate school assignment (Castillo-Montoya, 2015\*), this model requires practitioners to develop and implement tangible recommendations to address inequities within their respective departments.

*Keywords:* equity, marginalized identities, critical inquiry, equity-minded, student affairs practitioners

For decades, gaps in academic performance, retention, and graduation have persisted for students who are low-income, first-generation, and Students of Color (Espinosa et al., 2019). More specifically, for Black and Hispanic students at 4-year public institutions, 53.1% and 34.5%, respectively, left the institution without a conferred degree compared to 28.7% and 18.5% for White and Asian students (Espinosa et al., 2019).

Additionally, the gap in graduation rates has been widening between low-income students and their higher income counterparts (Cox, 2016). According to EAB (2019), 90% of low-income first-generation college students do not graduate within 6 years. Higher education institutions must adapt to the moment as demographics continue to shift and institutions become more racially diverse (National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, 2019); practitioners must ensure equitable access for all students regardless of identity. Through critical inquiry, interrogation of norms, and creation of tangible change, practitioners must continue to redesign and reshape our institutions into places where all students thrive.

In an effort to center equity-mindedness, this practice brief first describes common issues and barriers that exist when creating equitable change on college campuses, specifically within student affairs. Utilizing the Equity Tank model—a framework for critical inquiry, practitioners will be given a roadmap of tangible steps to promote structural change to demonstrate how student affairs practitioners and department leaders can hardwire equity-based inquiry in their respective functional areas.

## Barriers to Addressing Equity Issues Within Student Affairs Lack of Practitioner Training and Preparation

While some rendition of diversity, equity, or inclusion (DEI) is incorporated in almost all missions, values, and job descriptions in

student affairs, most practitioners receive insufficient training to understand complex multicultural issues and carry out these expectations (Pope et al., 2019). Creating and maintaining diverse and equitable practices on campus will not happen by the sheer will of well-intentioned professionals or programs. Equity must be the responsibility of *all* practitioners in *all* aspects of their work, which requires foundational knowledge on systems of oppression and their manifestations in higher education (Arminio et al., 2012). As a result, it is imperative that campuses provide on-going development of all staff, not just those with DEI explicitly written into their job duties.

### Limited Capacity

Student affairs jobs are known to be complex; practitioners wear a variety of hats, carry out emotionally intensive labor, often work evenings and weekends, and balance many duties outside of their job descriptions; oftentimes they serve as mentors and advisors for students and groups (Marshall et al., 2016). Student affairs departments, specifically during the coronavirus pandemic, are experiencing a heightened sense of stress and busyness due to furloughs, layoffs, hiring freezes, cost-containment efforts, and expanding workloads (Pettit, 2021). Knowing that DEI work takes time and effort, lack of capacity and burnout continues to exist as barriers to committing to resource-intensive structural change.

### Lack of Emphasis on Structural Change

Many DEI efforts on college campuses miss the mark when too much of an emphasis is placed on increasing the number of students with marginalized identities, without considering the structural barriers in place that create inequitable experiences for these populations (Arminio et al., 2012). For example, institutions often actively recruit Pell-eligible students but are not always willing to adjust housing deposit dates for students impacted by late aid disbursement. This misguided emphasis often results in institutions taking a deficit approach and blaming students for a perceived inability to successfully navigate the college environment (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). Having students with diverse experiences in

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classrooms together is not enough to ensure that *all* student's needs are met. Many degree completion efforts, including modes of support to increase connection and engagement, remain ineffective for those with marginalized identities (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008; Jehangir et al., 2012). Practitioners must problematize an institution's policies, practices, and procedures with a focus on structural change in addition to connection and engagement efforts. We must shift the responsibility from students and place the onus on institutions to address inequities and barriers.

### Limited Equity Change Models for Student Affairs

When seeking to address equity gaps in higher education, many functional areas in student affairs lack the same process models, toolkits, and audits often found in academic affairs. Many equity-based models focus on case studies for academic departments and are faculty focused (Ching, 2018; Culver et al., 2021; O'Meara et al., 2021). One of the most impactful of these equity-minded inquiry processes, Equity Scorecard, operationalizes five principles for equitable change outlined by Bensimon et al. (2016):

- “Clarity in language, goals, and measures is vital to effective equitable practices.
- “Equity-mindedness” should be the guiding paradigm for language and action.
- Equitable practice and policies are designed to accommodate differences in the contexts of students' learning—not to treat all students the same.
- Enacting equity requires a continual process of learning, disaggregating data, and questioning assumptions about relevance and effectiveness.
- Equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle” (para. 4).

Equity Scorecard engages key stakeholders to review campus data, complete audits, and then implement best practices to address barriers (Bensimon, 2012). However, Equity Scorecard rightfully remains focused on academic affairs and other key student success departments, such as financial aid and college access programs, where the largest opportunities to improve student outcomes exist (Bensimon et al., 2016; Gazmuri et al., 2010). In order to address inequities in *all* areas of the student experience, student affairs must be able to adapt the existing processes for equity-minded inquiry and apply them to functional areas excluded from the typical Equity Scorecard stakeholders. Thus, the purpose of this practice brief is to provide student affairs practitioners with tangible steps to implement within their respective departments to actualize equity.

Using the principles outlined by Bensimon et al. (2016), student affairs practitioners can address barriers such as homelessness, food insecurity, implicit bias in adjudication of conduct cases, inequitable policing of student organizations, and other equity issues where impactful structural changes are within their scope. We propose Equity Tank which embeds equity in policies, practices, and procedures and promotes long-lasting systemic change.

### Equity Tank Model

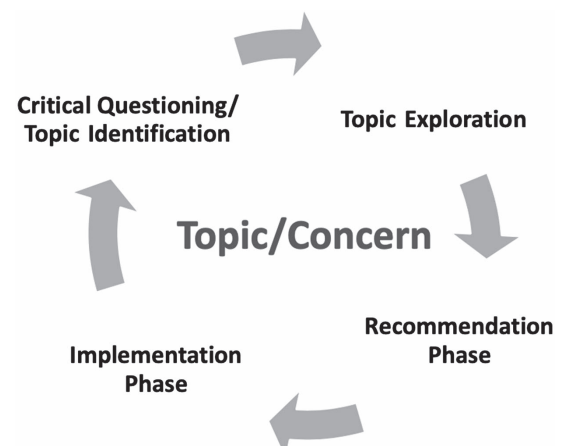
Three practitioners created Equity Tank after encountering consistent barriers to implementing equitable change within a housing and residence life department. The practitioners continued to reflect upon the following questions:

- How do we develop equity-minded practitioners throughout our organization?
- How do we proactively embed efforts to create equity-minded change in our organizations' annual cycles given capacity constraints?
- How do we move beyond frameworks of cultural competency to address structural barriers?
- How can we apply the same theory to practice models found in academic affairs to address inequities within the domain of student affairs?

Equity Tank (see Figure 1)—named after the popular “think tank” approach where individuals formulate advice and ideas based on a particular issue—aims to address barriers for marginalized students. Grounded in two equity-minded practice models, the Equity Scorecard (Bensimon, 2012) and an Equity-Minded Inquiry graduate school assignment (Castillo-Montoya, 2015), Equity Tank is a four-phase model that produces tangible structural change while engaging participants in a critical questioning process. The four phases, led by an assigned Equity Tank Steering Committee (ETSC), are critical reasoning, topic exploration, recommendation building, and implementation with participants involved at each phase.

Prior to engaging in the Equity Tank process, we highly recommend the ETSC conduct a DEI development series to prepare department staff. Suggested topics include intergroup dialogue, social identities, privilege and oppression, and critical self-reflection. This development ensures that when the process begins, staff have a common language around equity, are ready and able to engage in the critical inquiry process, and have experience engaging in difficult conversations.

**Figure 1**  
*Equity Tank Model*



Participation in this process includes all department staff (i.e., directors, assistant directors, coordinators, administrative staff, etc.). All levels of leadership are necessary in this process to ensure everyone's voices and perspectives are heard. Additionally, it places all participants on the same level as they explore identified topics without someone serving as the expert due to their role within the department. The participants will divide into teams of about four to six depending on the department size and needs. Each team should designate a Project Lead, who is responsible for convening the team, encouraging and tracking the team's progress, and maintaining communication with the ETSC.

### Critical Questioning/Topic Identification

Equity Tank will begin with the entire department brainstorming issues of inequity within the department's scope. In order to have the ability to uncover inequities, practitioners must first assess and acknowledge that their current practices, policies, and norms may not be working (Center for Urban Education, University of Southern California, n.d.). During this first phase, reflection questions are used to allow practitioners to begin to acknowledge the dysfunction within the department's current state of practice. The creators of Equity Tank crafted reflection questions to be used during the brainstorming phase that will allow staff members to begin to uncover the dysfunction:

- What are the touchy subjects related to equity that are difficult to talk about?
- What questions have you raised where you felt the response was "that's just the way it is"?
- What is an injustice that the department plays a role in?
- What concerns have students raised regarding our department?
- What are the unwritten rules, norms, and practices that need to be problematized?

As participants raise issues, they will identify and condense the notable themes. The ETSC will then select three to four total themes and assign a team to each. Addressing no more than three to four topics during one Equity Tank process will allow for more depth of exploration and ultimately more focus on the final implementation phase. However, the number of topics explored will depend on the participants and resources dedicated.

*Example:* A housing department identifies significant housing costs, bias incidents impacting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ+) students, disproportionate numbers of Students of Color through the conduct system, and housing insecurity during breaks as potential issues of equity. After reviewing all issues raised, the department formed three teams focused on low-income students, the conduct process, and LGBTQ+ students.

### Topic Exploration

After being assigned a topic from the critical questioning process, each group will then research and explore their topic over the course of about 2 months. The ETSC will give each team a set of guiding

questions to consider. However, since many different inequities exist per topic, it is ultimately the team's responsibility to decide the topic's scope. Teams will first examine their existing knowledge of the subject matter then further investigate the topic through broader contexts to identify existing inequities and ways to improve (Levy & Ronco, 2012). This research will be conducted by talking with fellow practitioners, benchmarking peer institutions, conducting a review of the scholarly literature, facilitating student focus groups, and identifying best practices (Levy & Ronco, 2012). Participants may choose to utilize any combination of the following resources:

- Library Guides and Resources
- Institutional Benchmarking
- Peer and Professional Networks (i.e., National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], American College Personnel Association [ACPA], Association for Orientation, Transition, and Retention in Higher Education [NODA], National Academic Advising Association [NACADA], Association of College and University Housing Officers - International [ACUHO-I], etc.)
- Department and Campus Staff

*Example:* One of the three Equity Tank teams focused on barriers for low-income students. The group set their research agenda by pondering the questions the ETSC provided:

- What are the current challenges that low-socioeconomic status (SES) students encounter in higher education? Specifically at our institution?
- What supports does our department offer to students with an economic need and how do we communicate these supports?
- How does the cost of our housing options affect students with a low SES?
- How does our billing process impact this population (e.g., damage billing, lock rekeys, late stays)? What factors are considered during the appeal process for billing?

Be sure to consider social and cultural capital while examining low-SES populations and their needs. First-generation students may overlap with low-SES students:

- What do we assume our students and families know about residential living? Are our marketing materials and resources accessible to this population, or do we assume prior knowledge?

After connecting with colleagues in the financial aid office, utilizing department data, and conducting a market cost analysis, the group determined that low-income students on their campus encountered barriers due to housing insecurity during breaks, higher than market cost housing prices, and early deposit deadlines.

### Recommendation Phase

Once teams have thoroughly investigated their topic, they will each propose a series of short-term (3–12 months) and long-term (1–5 years) recommendations. Including short-term recommendations can both address urgent needs and offer participants short-term wins

that are vital to building and sustaining momentum for organizational change (Kotter, 1996; Shubiak, 2021). Meanwhile, long-term recommendations allow groups to address the most challenging aspects of their topic.

Developing recommendations is often where tensions and limitations may present themselves due to differences in opinions. While diversity in opinions is vital and encouraged to create innovative solutions, the group must come to a consensus about recommendations. It may be helpful to prioritize recommendations presented by the group based on urgency of needs for the identified issue. Most importantly, recommendations must be well thought out as this will serve as the blueprint for an action plan with tangible steps to address the inequities.

Proposed recommendations should address both the ideal outcome along with potential barriers and how to overcome them. These drafted recommendations should be discussed with those with significant knowledge of the topic in order to illuminate some of the challenges that could arise in the implementation phase. For example, the team may propose a scholarship option offered from the housing department to assist low-income students with housing costs. The team may find themselves speaking with the budget manager to determine feasibility and potential challenges to ensure their recommendations address potential concerns. While limitations must be thoughtfully considered, they should not be a reason to avoid advocating for change. Instead, limitations should be acknowledged with each recommendation along with details on how to address or mitigate them.

Teams will present their recommendations to the broader department to cultivate buy-in and identify opportunities to combine initiatives. Once each group presents recommendations for their topic, the department will then shift to the implementation phase.

*Example:* The team focused on low-income residential students proposed the following recommendations:

- Offer limited housing options during winter, summer, and spring breaks for housing insecure students
- Create lower cost housing options for students
- Allow housing deposit waivers or deferrals for Pell-eligible students to align with aid disbursements
- Provide programming around financial literacy
- Have residence hall staff conduct outreach to Pell-eligible students who have not yet completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA)

## Implementation Phase

Once teams share their recommendations with the department, the ETSC will compile all recommendations to review with the department's leadership team. Leadership will then determine which recommendations take priority and move forward based on concurrent department initiatives. Not all recommendations will ultimately move forward; teams should be prepared to make the case for why leadership should spend time, money, and other resources to address inequities. Teams who grapple with barriers and potential workarounds in their recommendations may increase the likelihood that decision makers will approve ready-to-implement action items due

to developing recommendations that work through those barriers. Teams who do not acknowledge these barriers may find that decision makers may be hesitant to move forward.

Once a timeline has been established by department leadership, various department staff members will be assigned to assist with implementation. The persons assigned should be those in the best position to implement the recommendation, which may not necessarily be someone in the original team. Additionally, point persons may include key stakeholders not originally involved in the Equity Tank process. Throughout implementation, it will be important to establish a system to track progress and outcomes. This system can include assessment plans, target deadlines, and updates during department meetings. Transparency on progress, including the celebration of short-term wins, will help to build momentum and ensure accountability (Kotter, 1996; Shubiak, 2021).

Note that the implementation phase may be the most challenging due to the nature of recommendations submitted. Some recommendations may require great time and resources, have legal and policy implications, or directly conflict with other department priorities. Recognizing these challenges, we must still hold true to our responsibilities as student affairs practitioners in creating equitable environments for all students.

*Example:* Throughout the following academic year, department leadership identified point persons for implementing aspects of the approved recommendations and provided speaking time at monthly department meetings for updates on proposed recommendations.

## Discussion

Equity Tank seeks to address barriers to equity-minded change by accomplishing the following:

- Develop equity-minded practitioners throughout an organization
- Proactively embed efforts to create equity-minded change in an organization's annual cycle
- Move beyond frameworks of cultural competency to address structural barriers
- Apply the same theory to practice models found in academic affairs to address inequities within the domain of student affairs

The Equity Tank process centers equity-mindedness as the primary framework, producing tangible structural changes within the scope of a department. To produce impactful change, there needs to be clarity in language, goals, and measures with equity-mindedness as the guiding paradigm (Bensimon et al., 2016). Therefore, departments must prepare their staff by providing foundational information about equity-minded practice, utilizing resources from the Center for Urban Education at the University of Southern California, journal articles, and books that focus on equity in higher education.

In addition, Equity Tank focuses largely on producing structural change. However, the learning and skill building that comes from developing these communities of practice is another needed outcome in student affairs. Communities of practice are formed when learning occurs in a collective group that shares similar goals and

passions (Wenger, 2000). In addition, building Equity Tank into an annual cycle helps to ensure that participants are engaged in a continual process of critical inquiry, allowing them to apply this lens to their daily practice. Therefore, buy-in from department leadership is imperative if the cycle is to be sustained year after year to reinforce equity as a priority for the department.

While the department's piloting of Equity Tank focused on structural changes within the department's scope, more impactful change will require interdepartmental and interdivisional collaboration. Bensimon et al. (2016) emphasized that "equity must be enacted as a pervasive institution- and system-wide principle" (para. 4). Student affairs should not only adapt equity-minded process models found within academic affairs but should build coalitions with academic affairs as well to have a far-reaching impact on students. While Equity Tank was one attempt to adapt foundational equity-minded change models to student affairs, Bensimon et al. (2016) and other equity scholars could further expand the impact of their work by directly addressing how practitioners might adapt their models to new contexts. However, in the absence of this scholarship, we believe the Equity Tank model is broad enough to fit different types of industries beyond student affairs and college campuses (i.e., nonprofit, private agencies).

### Conclusion

Student affairs departments are central to increasing students' sense of belonging, providing holistic support structures, and increasing student engagement and agency. As a result, student affairs has the responsibility to address issues of inequity. In order to do so effectively, leaders must address the following questions:

- How do we develop equity-minded practitioners throughout our organization?
- How do we proactively embed efforts to create equity-minded change in our organizations' annual cycles given capacity constraints?
- How do we move beyond frameworks of cultural competency to address structural barriers?
- How can we apply the same theory to practice models found in academic affairs to address inequities within the domain of student affairs?

The Equity Tank process is one way university stakeholders and practitioners can critically analyze their role in perpetuating systems of oppression on their campuses. Through engagement with the process, participants also have the opportunity to develop their own social justice knowledge, awareness, and skills. Moreover, it facilitates on-going collective and critical reflection, resulting in tangible structural change to remove barriers for marginalized students despite capacity constraints. Practitioners and departments all across campus must work to strengthen partnerships, build broad coalitions, and include both academic and student affairs in the process. This collective effort to embed critical inquiry throughout systems of higher education is what can actualize equity on college campuses.

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