

Chapter 1

From Equity Talk to Equity Walk

A Shared Starting Point

This equity journey begins with you.

Change must happen individually before it can happen collectively. People drive change, lead change, and sustain change. Lasting change happens when educators understand both the meaning of equity and that meaning is represented through personal values, beliefs, and actions. This is why this journey *must* start with you. We want you first to engage in self-reflection on your current equity definition, values, and beliefs before we delve into the explanations and examples of what we mean by equity, and more specifically, racial equity.

How do you define equity? What is your understanding of how equity and equality intersect or are codependent? What are specific examples of how equity is a value for you and to your institution? What motivates you to ensure equity at your institution? How does your understanding of equity translate into your values, beliefs, and actions? Do you have an equity talk *and* an equity walk?

In our experiences working with educators at hundreds of higher education institutions, there is common desire among most to address equity in student outcomes. It is popular to hear, “We want to close the equity gaps in graduation, progression, and retention for our underrepresented students,” or “Closing the opportunity gaps in our student outcomes is our equity imperative.” For most, this is the place where they enter into the equity conversation. In this context, equity is defined as understanding students’ needs and addressing those needs by providing the necessary academic and social support services to help level the playing field so students can achieve their goals. Data are shared and discussed to highlight the equity gaps in student success. The institution makes a commitment to eliminate those gaps, and the interventions to do so are discussed and implemented. In this book, we will emphasize the importance of collecting data on student success outcomes. We realize that it is a critical first step for engaging in conversations about equity. What usually creates angst among some educators is when we turn the discussion to the reason for the equity gaps, and we point out that there are biases and privilege in the language we use to describe students, the way we present data, and the interventions that we propose to eliminate inequities. For our efforts, by focusing first on your willingness to engage in conversations about student success outcomes, we acknowledge that we want to meet you where you are in your current journey, based on the conversations you are having at your institutions. We will hopefully outline a path not only for examining equity in student outcomes, but also for encouraging you to expand your practitioner knowledge for racial equity and justice in higher education. This is what we believe is the equity imperative.

Educators with an equity talk *and* an equity walk critically examine institutional policies, practices, and structures through a lens that questions why inequities exist to change the educational environment to support the success of students – especially students who have been historically and continuously marginalized in our educational systems. These educators don’t just talk about equity, but it is evident in their inquiry-process, decision-making,

interactions, and reflections. Equity talk and equity walk educators interrogate the concept of equity and its relationship to equality, including how the paradox of equality requires a critical examination of the historical, social, cultural, and political perspectives that make the concept of equality a misnomer for many in our society, especially minoritized students.

Unfortunately, some educators only have an equity talk, but *not* an equity walk. In this category are the educators who preach equity, but equity values and practices aren't evident in their actions. They have a cursory understanding of equity. In our experiences working with educators across many sectors of higher education, we have seen those who embrace the equity talk, but struggle with the equity walk if the reason behind embracing equity talk stems mostly from it being the current buzzword or hot topic. We don't want to imply that educators who have embraced equity talk do not want to make their respective institutions more equitable. But having an equity talk that will lead to change calls for a comprehensive understanding of what the term means in relation to current and past experiences and institutional contexts. This is where educators in this group are falling short. Often, within this context, when we ask users of the word *equity* what it means for them individually and for institutional practice and change, colleagues on the same campus have various definitions and lack shared understanding of the historical and social contexts that have shaped the need to address equity. This makes it difficult to believe that equity is a pervasive institutional value, especially when campus practitioners have limited knowledge of the multifaceted contexts surrounding the examination of equity.

Other educators have embraced equity talk not from a personal belief but because it is the current buzzword. We love buzzwords in higher education. When we find ones that we believe reflect what we should have as our goals and our values, we quickly add them to our vernacular. The buzz around these words evolves into the reasons we seek to redesign, update, or transform our strategic plans and vision statements to be more like our peer institutions and to join the popular dialogue. Our motivation for engaging in equity talk may contradict

our actual beliefs. As pointed out by Estela Mara Bensimon, “It seems like ‘equity’ is everywhere. ... Equity, once viewed suspiciously as racially divisive and associated with the activism of social justice movements that academic purists disdain as ‘advocacy’ work, is now being enthusiastically embraced on the academic scene” (2018, p. 95). But, are we truly embracing equity or just a current trend?

There are also educators who struggle with equity talk and have no desire to have an equity walk. This category of educators needs little explanation. These are the people who strongly believe that there are no biases, prejudice, or inequities in our current systems, structures, policies, and practices. They believe that we are in a post-racial society, and equality of opportunity is mainly defined by one’s willingness to strive for excellence and work hard. Everyone has an equal chance to succeed, and personal motivation is the determining factor for success.

Educators who fall into this category are not willing to acknowledge that a longstanding belief in a hierarchy of human value has fueled systemic and structural inequities in our country. In addition, they often challenge us by saying we are advocating for students to not be active participants in their education.

For clarity, we believe that success requires reciprocal engagement from students as well as from educators. Students must fully engage in the pursuit of their educational goals, but the institution must also create a learning environment that promotes equity and inclusion by understanding the diversity of the students that it seeks to educate. At the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), we call this *engaged inclusivity*. Engaged inclusivity “transforms the dialogue on inclusion from general acceptance and tolerance of difference to *active* institutional transformation, based on the belief that the richness of our culture is because of our diversity and a recognition of our common humanity” (AAC&U 2019). And, even for us at AAC&U through our national effort to partner with higher education institutions to establish Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation (TRHT) Campus Centers, we have been prompted by Dr. Gail Christopher, the visionary and architect of the TRHT effort, to reflect on our use of

the term *inclusive excellence* as a representation of privilege and hierarchy because it implies that there is a group who (i) has the power to control access to excellence by deciding who is included, (ii) has ownership of what defines excellence, and (iii) requires that others must be invited to be part of this group in order to achieve excellence. Dr. Christopher is encouraging us to use the terminology *expansive* because it breaks down the notion of hierarchy and ownership of excellence to embrace the diversity of ways that excellence can be defined (personal communication, June 25, 2019). Equity work requires high levels of and continuous accountability, assessment, and reflection for all.

This leads us back to the original question: Where are you on your equity journey? It is important that, before you continue reading this book, you engage in reflection on your equity talk and equity walk based on your current understanding of equity. We say your *current* understanding of equity because, in this book, we will explore multidimensional definitions of equity, and we want to meet you where you are. We hope that by figuring out where you are on your equity journey, you will figure out where you want to be by the time you finish reading this book. Do you have an equity talk *and* an equity walk? Do you have mostly equity talk, but *not* an equity walk? Or, are you struggling with *both* equity talk and equity walk?

We wrote this book because we believe in change and that individuals have the power to grow and to evolve. We are motivated to do this work because of the students we encounter on a daily basis that need more educators to have an equity talk *and* an equity walk. We all play a vital role in their pathways to success.

Defining Equity and Inclusive Excellence

The Center for Urban Education (CUE) defines equity as “a two-dimensional concept. One axis represents institutional accountability that is demonstrated by the achievement of racial parity in student outcomes, ... [and the] second axis represents a critical understanding of the omnipresence of whiteness at the

institutional and practice levels” (Bensimon 2018, p. 97). According to Bensimon et al. (2016), practitioners hoping to be equity-minded “need to consider equity in connection with historical and political understandings of [racial] stratification.” Furthermore, “the authentic exercise of equity and equity-mindedness requires explicit attention to structural inequality and institutionalized racism and demands system-changing responses” (Bensimon 2018, p. 97). To examine equity effectively, practitioners must understand how racism and a pervasive belief in the hierarchy of human value have shaped our systems, policies, and practices. To ignore how structures were designed is to ignore the necessary processes for eliminating inequities. We will explain and illustrate this definition of equity and the concept of equity-mindedness in the following chapters through campus vignettes and examples of data analysis.

At AAC&U, equity is a core component of what it means to make excellence inclusive, and it is deeply integrated with diversity and inclusion efforts to improve educational quality and institutional operations:

The vision and practice of inclusive excellence ... calls for higher education to address diversity, inclusion, and equity as critical to the well-being of democratic culture The action of making excellence inclusive requires that we uncover inequities in student success, identify effective educational practices, and build such practices organically for sustained institutional change.

(AAC&U n.d.)

To make excellence inclusive, institutions should have widely shared and commonly understood definitions for diversity, equity, and inclusion that reflect the institutional context and values. For AAC&U, diversity is an understanding of how individual and group differences contribute to the diverse thoughts, knowledge, and experiences that are the foundation of a high-quality liberal education. Inclusion is an active, intentional, and ongoing engagement with diversity across the curriculum, co-curriculum, and our communities to increase awareness, content knowledge, cognitive sophistication, and empathic understanding of the complex ways

individuals interact within systems and institutions. Equity prioritizes the creation of opportunities for minoritized students to have equal outcomes and participation in educational programs that can close the achievement gaps in student success and completion.

While these multidimensional definitions for examining equity are varied, they are interdependent and, when utilized collaboratively, they can support comprehensive campus efforts to advance equity and sustainable change. For example, AAC&U's definition of making excellence inclusive focuses on who the students are, equity in student outcomes, and stresses the critical examination of educational environments in which the student will engage. This approach aligns with CUE's efforts to achieve racial parity in student outcomes. Being equity-minded requires examining why inequities exist and understanding how the racialization of institutional practices sustains those inequities. This part of the process – understanding the influence and the historical power of whiteness on structural racism – is often where equity efforts fall short. We believe that the intersection of making excellence inclusive and being equity-minded is the pathway for having a true equity walk. These points will be discussed and illustrated in the following chapters, including using examples from a national project led by AAC&U in partnership with CUE to expand the current research on building institutional capacity to examine equity in student achievement and to identify promising evidence-based interventions for improving student learning and success, and examples from the CUE's work with higher education institutions. We will also illustrate what happens when equity is not viewed as multidimensional, resulting in a limited approach that may not lead to sustainable cultural change at an institution.

Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence

Let's start our equity journey by providing an overview of the student success data typically and not typically collected at higher education institutions to initiate conversations about equity. In 2015, as part of AAC&U's Centennial celebration, the association released

a number of member surveys to identify opportunities for future work and to assess progress toward shared goals. In AAC&U’s report, *Bringing Equity and Quality Learning Together: Institutional Priorities for Tracking and Advancing Underserved Students’ Success* (Hart Research Associates 2015), we learned that many institutions are implementing evidence-based practices to advance student success, including requiring student participation in high-impact learning practices (HIPs) that support higher rates of persistence and higher levels of achievement of defined learning outcomes (see Figure 1.1).

However, as shown in Figure 1.2, while “many AAC&U member institutions are tracking and disaggregating data on the retention and graduation rates of students from historically underserved groups, far fewer institutions are disaggregating data on

	Required of All Students	Optional
	%	%
First-year experiences that support the transition to college	60	31
First-year academic seminars	52	30
Global or world culture studies	52	41
Diversity studies and experiences	34	53
Service learning in courses	14	79
Learning communities	12	59
Undergraduate research	9	87
Practicums and supervised fieldwork	7	90
Internships	6	91
Study abroad	2	94

Figure 1.1 Data from AAC&U Member Surveys on required or optional high-impact practices at AAC&U Member Institutions.

SOURCE: Hart Research Associates 2015.

Institutions report on their tracking and disaggregation of data on student persistence, graduation, and/or achievement of learning outcomes.

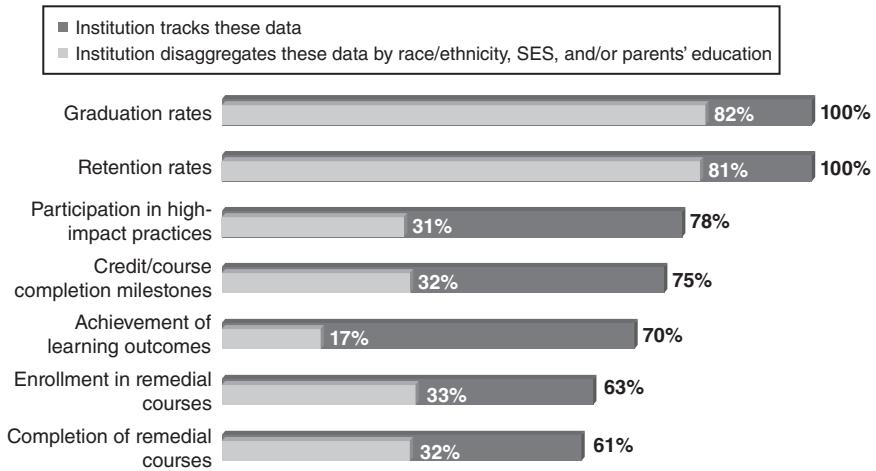


Figure 1.2 Data from AAC&U Member Surveys on tracking and disaggregation of data.

SOURCE: Hart Research Associates 2015.

participation in HIPs or on achievement of learning outcomes” (Hart Research Associates 2015, p. 5). In other words, the institutions are collecting data in the aggregate on student participation in these educational practices – which have been found to be beneficial for underserved student learning and success (Kuh 2008; Kuh and O’Donnell 2013; Finley and McNair 2013) – but they are not disaggregating data to examine questions of equity in student achievement. The same is true for student achievement of learning outcomes. Only 17% of surveyed institutions report that they are disaggregating data on student achievement of learning outcomes. However, when institutions do disaggregate data, they are more likely to look “at differences by race and ethnicity than [students’] socioeconomic status or their parents’ level of educational attainment” (Hart Research Associates 2015, p. 5), which provides important data for addressing questions around racial equity.

According to AAC&U’s *Bringing Equity and Quality Learning Together* report, and as shown in Figure 1.3, “More than half of AAC&U member institutions have equity goals to close racial and/or ethnic gaps in retention and on-time graduation. Far fewer have goals to address inequities in achievement of learning outcomes or participation in high-impact practices” (Hart Research

Proportion of Institutions That Have Set Equity Goals for Specific Groups

	All Respondents
	%
My institution has set goals to close gaps in retention and/or on-time graduation among students. . .	
From different racial and ethnic groups	57
From different socioeconomic groups	36
Whose parents have different levels of educational attainment	27
My institution has set goals to close gaps in achievement of student learning outcomes among students. . .	
From different racial and ethnic groups	31
From different socioeconomic groups	24
Whose parents have different levels of educational attainment	14
My institution has set goals to close gaps in participation in key high-impact learning practices among students. . .	
From different racial and ethnic groups	23
From different socioeconomic groups	23
Whose parents have different levels of educational attainment	15

Figure 1.3 Data from AAC&U Member Surveys on student persistence, graduation, or achievement of learning outcomes.
SOURCE: Hart Research Associates 2015.

Associates 2015, p. 10). Given AAC&U's mission and focus on making excellence inclusive for all students through access to a high-quality liberal education that prepares them for success in work, life, and productive citizenship, these findings illustrate a need to accelerate efforts to help institutions build capacity to examine questions of equity, specifically for assessing equity in HIPs and student achievement of learning outcomes.

However, if campus educators do not have a widely shared understanding of equity and inclusive excellence, just releasing the member surveys on equity and student success does not automatically translate the vision of committing to equity and inclusive excellence into campus practice. AAC&U and CUE needed to intentionally develop an opportunity for interested campuses to work with both of our organizations to critically explore the definitions of equity and inclusive excellence and the actions needed to eliminate inequities in student outcomes.

In 2015, AAC&U selected 13 institutions (see Figure 1.4) through a competitive selection process to engage in a three-year project sponsored by Strada Education Network (formerly USA Funds) and Ascendium Education Group (formerly Great Lakes Higher Education Corporation & Affiliates) to address the following project goals that emerged as priorities from AAC&U's member surveys:

- Increased access to and participation in HIPs.
- Increased completion, retention, and graduation rates for underserved students (e.g., students who are minoritized based on race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, adult-learner status, and/or first-generation status).
- Increased achievement of learning outcomes for underserved students using direct assessment measures, including AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (*VALUE*) rubrics or rubrics developed by campuses.
- Increased student awareness and understanding of the value of guided learning pathways that incorporate HIPs for workforce preparation and engaged citizenship.

Anne Arundel Community College (MD)
California State University–Northridge (CA)
California State University–Sacramento (CA)
Carthage College (WI)
Clark Atlanta University (GA)
Dominican University (IL)
Florida International University (FL)
Governors State University (IL)
Lansing Community College (MI)
Morgan State University (MD)
North Carolina A&T State University (NC)
Pomona College (CA)
Wilbur Wright College (IL)

Figure 1.4 Institutions participating in AAC&U's Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence: Campus-Based Practices for Student Success Project.

Over the course of three years, the campuses participated in an Equity Academy, webinars, project meetings, conferences, and campus team meetings to build institutional capacity to achieve the project goals. Early in the process, we encouraged the campus leaders to spend significant time discussing who should be part of the campus teams. This is an important step and an element emphasized for teams attending AAC&U's summer institutes for the past 25 years. It is sometimes an overlooked part of the process for providing the necessary structure for examining equity. The teams needed to represent multiple perspectives and key areas of the campus community, including students. The team members needed to be change agents and viewed as campus influencers. They needed to be able to effectively articulate the goals of the effort to their respective campus communities and explain how those goals advanced the institution's strategic priorities and vision.

The Equity Academy was held in collaboration with CUE at the beginning of the project to provide a common starting point for the 13 institutions. It was important for the campuses to come together for a two-day academy not only to begin building a community of practice, but also to have the necessary time to reflect on project goals, to explore individual and shared understandings of equity and inclusive

excellence, and to develop first drafts of their campus action plans. Each team had to complete a campus data inventory developed by CUE that included their existing data for the project goal of increasing completion, retention, and graduation rates for underserved students. The Equity Academy used this project goal to illustrate equity-minded data analysis that will be explored in Chapter 3. These data represented common metrics that all campuses had access to prior to the Equity Academy and a shared starting point for engaging in conversations related to equity-minded data analysis.

Prior to attending the Equity Academy, campus teams also received copies of AAC&U's *Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence: Campus Guide for Self-Study and Planning* (2015a) and were asked to engage in conversations to assess current practice related to the 10 action steps that were informed by research, member surveys, and campus practice (please note some phrasing has changed from the original document to align with current terminology and institutional values):

1. Know who your students are and will be.
2. Commit to frank, hard dialogues about the climate for minoritized students on your campus, with the goal of affecting a paradigm shift in language and actions.
3. Invest in culturally responsive practices that lead to the success of minoritized students.
4. Set and monitor equity goals and devote aligned resources to achieve them.
5. Develop and actively pursue a clear vision and goals for achieving high-quality learning.
6. Expect and prepare all students to produce culminating or signature work.¹

¹ In signature work, a student uses his or her cumulative learning to pursue a significant project related to a problem she or he defines. In the project, which should be conducted throughout at least one semester, the student takes the lead and produces work that expresses insights and learning gained from the inquiry and demonstrates the skills and knowledge she or he has acquired. Faculty and mentors provide support and guidance. Signature work might be pursued in a capstone course or in research conducted across thematically linked courses, or in another field-based activity or internship. It might include practicums, community service, or other experiential learning. It always should include substantial writing, multiple kinds of reflection on learning, and visible results (AAC&U 2015c).

7. Provide support to help students develop guided plans to achieve essential learning outcomes (see Figure 1.5; AAC&U 2007), prepare for and complete signature work, and connect college with careers.
8. Identify high-impact practices best suited to your students and your institution's quality framework.
9. Ensure that essential learning outcomes are addressed and high-impact practices are incorporated across all programs.
10. Make student achievement – specifically, minoritized student achievement – visible and valued.

For example, the first step, knowing who your students are, involves more than just examining institutional demographic information on the student population. Campus teams in the Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence project were asked to examine both quantitative and qualitative data to develop insights into the needs of their current and future student populations: What do your student stories tell you about the work that needs to be done to improve the student experience and educational environment?

We also asked each campus to reflect on their pathways for student success: At what key points on the pathways do students have access to high-impact practices? Is participation optional or required? Can students articulate the value of high-impact practices in relation to career preparation? What makes these practices high-impact, and for whom?

As part of the institute, the campus teams developed action plans based on a template used by hundreds of campuses that have attended AAC&U's Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success over the past 10 years (see Figure 1.6). It was important that the campus teams designed action plans with specific equity goals informed by institutional context and data analysis. To promote accountability, the action plans included a space for listing specific team actions with a timeline and, most importantly, how the campus teams planned to measure success. Action plans also asked the campus teams to identify strategies for engaging campus

The Essential Learning Outcomes



Beginning in school, and continuing at successively higher levels across their college studies, students should prepare for twenty-first-century challenges by gaining:

★ Knowledge of Human Cultures and the Physical and Natural World

- Through study in the sciences and mathematics, social sciences, humanities, histories, languages, and the arts

***Focused** by engagement with big questions, both contemporary and enduring*

★ Intellectual and Practical Skills, including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

***Practiced extensively**, across the curriculum, in the context of progressively more challenging problems, projects, and standards for performance*

★ Personal and Social Responsibility, including

- Civic knowledge and engagement—local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

***Anchored** through active involvement with diverse communities and real-world challenges*

★ Integrative Learning, including

- Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies

***Demonstrated** through the application of knowledge, skills, and responsibilities to new settings and complex problems*

Note: This listing was developed through a multiyear dialogue with hundreds of colleges and universities about needed goals for student learning; analysis of a long series of recommendations and reports from the business community; and analysis of the accreditation requirements for engineering, business, nursing, and teacher education. The findings are documented in previous publications of the Association of American Colleges and Universities: *College Learning for the New Global Century* (2007) and *The LEAP Vision for Learning* (2011). For more information, see www.aacu.org/leap.



Figure 1.5 Essential learning outcomes.

SOURCE: AAC&U 2007.

stakeholders. To effectively engage in equity work, campuses needed to have a transparent communication strategy, an understanding of the barriers to accomplish goals, and strategies for overcoming those obstacles. Equity work cannot be done in isolation or with a select few. It needs to engage the entire campus community.

This template is offered to help you shape your campus action plan. It is not meant to be prescriptive and should be adapted to your specific project goals and institutional context.

Campus Action Plan Goals

Campus actions plans should work toward the following measurable goals to advance equity in student learning and success:

- Increased student access to and participation in high-impact practices (HIPs)
- Increased course completion, retention, and graduation rates for minoritized students (e.g., students of color, socioeconomically diverse students, first-generation students, adult learners)
- Increased achievement of learning outcomes for underserved students using direct assessment measures
- Increased student understanding of guided learning pathways that incorporate HIPs and the value to workforce preparation and engaged citizenship

Institution's Project Description That Addresses the Four Objectives Listed Above

Please explain how the proposed campus project aligns with the institution's strategic vision for student learning and success.

Equity Goals Based on Project Objectives

Targeted Intervention Strategies to Achieve Equity Goals

Barriers to Accomplishment

Opportunities for Support

Engagement Plan for Stakeholders

Communication Strategy

Team Actions and Timeline

Evidence of Success on Each Project Objective

How will you track and monitor progress?

Figure 1.6 Campus action plan template.

For many educators, the Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence project and the process described above represent a familiar and comfortable way for engaging in conversations around equity and student success. We intentionally started with a description of this project and decided to use some examples from this effort in this book to meet you where you are. We believe this type of equity work is an important step in moving from equity talk to equity walk, but it is only one step, just like disaggregating data represents one step. Our focus will be on what happens when:

- We start asking about why these inequities exist.
- We start to question privilege and biases in the systems and structures that perpetuate inequities, specifically racial inequities.
- We stop using language that masks who the students really are.
- We stop believing that the accepted norm should be from the dominant culture's viewpoint.

Closing Reflection

In the following chapters, we will examine strategies that emerged from our campus work and from the Committing to Equity and Inclusive Excellence project, including how to take these steps:

- Align strategic priorities with transparent equity values.
- Build a campus culture of equity-mindedness through intentionality.
- Provide faculty and staff development to examine equity.
- Share and use data across all campus sectors.
- Leverage resources to advance equity goals.

We will also raise guiding questions for examining equity from a multidimensional perspective. Not every strategy will be applicable for your institution; institutional context and culture are still driving forces for determining how campuses will engage in equity efforts.

Finally, if you are engaged in conversations about equity in education, you should be keenly aware that disparities in student

outcomes persist. This book will not reiterate the plethora of national data on student achievement gaps in higher education. There are numerous publications and reports (e.g. Espinosa et al. 2019; Witham et al. 2015; AAC&U 2015b; Cahalan et al. 2018) that illustrate this common story of student access and success in our educational system. Instead, we will focus on how institutions can examine their data and practices through equity lenses, how they define equity and equity-mindedness, and what that means for campus change. Throughout this book, we have included varying but complementary strategies for examining equity based on the missions of our respective organizations, the work of the institutions that participated in the national project, and our individual campus consultations. All strategies play a role in advancing equity and are interdependent, but examining racial equity is a priority that often gets marginalized. The following chapters will also explore how various approaches must be integrated if we are to truly address issues of equity in higher education. In this process, we will also identify where more work needs to be done as we embrace equity talk to have an equity walk as we seek to build capacity for equity-mindedness among first-generation equity practitioners.