

Equity for All Arizonans

COMMUNITY COLLEGE PERSPECTIVES ON EQUITY FOR ALL ARIZONANS

October 31, 2023 – Online via Zoom

DEFINING EQUITY AND ITS IMPACT

Equity means removing barriers that prevent individuals from pursuing their goals. If we consider the body politic as an entity, and individual community members as part of the body, equality would simply give each member the same, whereas equity looks holistically to see what each member needs and provides it accordingly, so that each member of the community contributes to the whole body of the community. Equity would look at each individual situation and draw the needed resources to them. This necessarily requires us to consider how well our society provides for the needs of daily living across the board.

In Arizona there are some challenges to assure that people are treated equitably. This begins with a livable wage, a sum of money that would support a family of four. In some rural communities, for example in Page, there is a lack of available housing, because Airbnbs are not regulated, and for other reasons.

A holistic view of equity involves a many-layered approach to the topic. Equity is more than just assuring that people have tangible resources. It considers historic circumstances, including past conduct that has harmed some populations. It includes not just the seen but the unseen, including the ability to exercise rights and freedoms. It begins with the needs of individuals to feel safe and secure, the base layer of Maslow's hierarchy of needs and goes on from there.

OPTIMIZING THE POTENTIAL OF STUDENTS THROUGH EQUITABLE APPROACHES

An equitable approach is important to optimizing student potential. It is equitable to enable students to connect to the information they need to access resources including housing, food, and jobs. The information needed to maneuver complex bureaucratic systems is extremely valuable but not equally accessible to all. Some students, for example first generation college students, may have less familiarity with or access to informational resources, and as a result they do not obtain the same level of support as other students who have better access to information.

Housing is a critical resource for students, particularly in rural communities. Without stable housing students have difficulty taking advantage of educational resources. The shortage of housing affects both students and faculty and may result in people leaving communities where adequate housing is simply not available. The proliferation of Airbnbs has changed the nature of some communities, using up the supply of affordable housing and making the communities less family friendly. These properties tend to be owned by those who are economically well-off, which increases the inequity of the housing shortage.

Access to high-quality, high-speed internet is another critical resource that is not equitably available. Without access to broadband internet, it is impossible to apply for jobs and access certain other resources. People sometimes struggle to access those resources, particularly in rural communities.

Some individuals suffer from food insecurity. Food pantries at community colleges are increasingly used not just by students, but also by faculty and staff. Students struggle to meet all their own needs, and some cannot afford to continue in school because they cannot obtain affordable housing, enough food, access to needed services, and other resources.

Ultimately students want faculty to care about them and their general welfare. Retention of both faculty and students is an important consideration for most community colleges. A system that is set up to promote caring interactions between faculty and students is beneficial to all concerned.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR OPTIMIZING STUDENT POTENTIAL THROUGH EQUITY

Faculty could benefit from learning more about DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) programs implemented by industry. For example, some companies offer internship programs that might provide pathways for students to individual success.

We should look at changing the whole structure of educational systems, which have been based on inequitable treatment of marginalized populations. Colleges should adopt a policy that implements a holistic approach to inclusion, engagement, and respect. They could use the social determinants of health model adopted by Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS) and to determine whether the use of the tool could be expanded to populations other than AHCCCS. This tool could be used to examine the circumstances that affect their faculty and students, provide opportunities for engagement, Colleges could take steps to simplify the language used in connection with programs, to reduce barriers to access. Sometimes form overwhelms substance and the utility of programs that are intended to help students is diminished.

Institutions that want to get around DEI issues create a retention center. They would do better to make information and resources more accessible and available to populations of students that face the greatest challenges.

NEXT STEPS AND ACTIONS

No single entity or agency is or should be responsible for addressing issues of equity and opportunities to optimize potential using equity. But we do need a plan to address the issues, and that plan should encompass the many diverse types of actions that could be taken to address the opportunities. For example, we currently have a shortage of teachers. We can see billboards along I-10 recruiting Arizona teachers to move to Texas. Similar outside forces affect other conditions. We tend to think that the solution is something that should be addressed by the Legislature, legislators have not been responsive or effective in dealing with these issues. It is usually necessary and helpful to address such issues rapidly and through the efforts of individuals and institutions other than the Legislature.

There are a variety of reasons for lackluster legislative performance. Elected officials have an interest in obtaining and maintaining their positions of power. Arizona's electoral system does not encourage broad participation in primary elections, which results in a situation where elected officials feel responsible only to the minority of voters that caused them to be elected. In rural and Indigenous communities, voting is a huge problem for those who do not have a mail delivery address. A solution may be to change the system in ways that make it more responsive to marginalized groups.

Equity is a powerful concept that can be brought to bear in favor of programs that improve conditions for those communities that are under-resourced or that face other challenges that put them at a disadvantage relative to other communities. Getting additional resources to these communities can pay huge dividends.

INDIVIDUAL COMMITMENTS TO ACTION

Recognizing that the power to change the future begins with each individual, participants committed to take personal actions based on their experience and discussions during the Community College Perspectives on Equity for All Arizonans program. Below are individual actions that were shared.

I WILL...

- Continue to use my platform as an author and scholar to call attention to injustice and to advocate for equitable approaches to educating and supporting college students.
- Request permission to post the minutes of this session to our community college mailing list and draft an article for sharing.
- Look for opportunities to remove barriers in accessing education through removing unnecessary red tape.
- Continue to listen thoughtfully, and to care.
- Commit to use my platform as a method to provide solutions, space, and collaboration that advance historically excluded communities with educational access.
- Continue to support our high school students' transition to college.
- Support candidates and legislation based on the degree to which they further equitable outcomes.
- Continue to learn what impacts my community and educate others on various platforms I am active on (social media or as a blogger/writer).