September 2022

From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education

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Book Review

From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education

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Review of

> *Tia B. McNair, Estela M. Bensimon, and Lindsey Malcolm-Piquex, From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education (Jossey-Bass, 2019). 160 pp. ISBN: 13: 978-1119237914*

From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education takes a bold position on the inequities within the U.S. education system, which impacts racially minoritized student success. Situated in the context of higher education, the authors contend these inequities are propagated by administrators and faculty/staff. The text strived to illuminate the pervasive ways racial inequity permeates through higher education utilizing case studies, critical discourse, and document analyses. This methodology provides various lenses to demonstrate the appropriate verbiage, behavior/actions, and course materials personnel should use rather than what is currently deemed appropriate. The goal was to arm practitioners with the necessary knowledge to combat racial injustices to create an equity-minded campus culture. This knowledge was conveyed through each argument proffered by the authors and supplemented by strategies practitioners can implement within their institutions and courses. Equity is everyone's business; there are some who will do everything in their power to advance or oppose it. These individuals were succinctly categorized by the authors as either possessing: 'Equity Talk and Equity Walk', 'Equity Talk, but no Equity Walk', and no desire to possess either. Numerous examples were leveraged to demonstrate the difference between the three while illustrating how pervasive whiteness is within academe. The multitude of examples were excellent but may pose a challenge for readers with a novice understanding of the subject matter. Despite this limitation, the text may prove beneficial for all who read it as it is ladled with transferable strategies that can be incorporated within the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to enhance public management and social policy.

Higher education institutions are entrenched within the public sphere, building civism and public trust, providing citizens with educational opportunities, and cementing their place in civil society (Hall, 2006; Lorentzen, 2010). As a doctoral student studying public administration, higher education provides a platform to witness its multifarious nature. Examining how administrators' draft policies and expect educators to enact them without the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) via formal training is particularly compelling. Carboni et al. (2019) suggest doctoral student training poses a barrier to many measures of institutional success; in public administration, doctoral training is predicated upon the expertise of specific faculty. This begs the question: If doctoral students are the future educators of tomorrow and learn from faculty, are students the barriers or does the issue reside within parochial practices perpetuated by administrators and/or faculty in public administration? The answer is clear or rather, it should be: faculty and administrators need robust training focalizing racial equity (Gooden & Myers, Jr., 2004). Such training for these groups is necessary to address current and future racial equity challenges that are both internal and external to academe in public affairs, public management, social policy, and administration contexts. This is a phenomenon, From Equity Talk to Equity Walk: Expanding Practitioner Knowledge for Racial Justice in Higher Education, explores. The authors examine the inequities that exist within higher education that are perpetuated by two forces: higher education personnel (e.g., administrators and faculty/staff) and non-equity-minded policies/practices (McNair et al., 2019). The text seeks to equip practitioners with the KSAs to recognize and rectify the consequences of the long-standing racist rhetoric that has infiltrated U.S. society.

Argument Summary

The book aims to illuminate the covert instances of racial inequity endemic to higher education, which adversely impacts racially minoritized student success. This was accomplished through a series of case studies, critical discourse and document analyses, and member surveys to accentuate theoretical and practical notions of equity. Through these methods, McNair et al., explain how to build an equity-minded campus culture by highlighting the faults within many educators' mentalities, their pedagogical approaches, and materials (2019). The aforementioned are common methods utilized by public administration researchers that can be leveraged to assess their own courses, practices, and programs to redress inequities. Thus, educators are lacking, not the students, which parallels core tenets of public administration since these institutions are meant to serve students much like how governments serves the citizenry.

McNair et al. (2019) contend an equity-minded campus culture can be built through using and communicating data as a tool to advance equity because using clear language and disaggregating data makes inequities visible. Consequently, alignment of institutional strategic priorities and capacity can be built, developing a sense of 'equity-mindedness' amongst first-generation equity practitioners. These practitioners are 'agents of change' and when racial equity is the focal point of an institution's agenda whilst embraced by faculty/staff, building and assessing equity-minded competence is highly probable. According to Gooden and Myers, Jr., (2004), social equity has not been fully incorporated into the values or practices of public administration. Therefore, effective incorporation may result in improved course materials regarding policy implementation, measurement, and other facets integral to the training of public administrators (Gooden & Myers, Jr., 2004). Thus, it is imperative public administration scholars and educators be agents of change to advance social and racial equity. Subsequently, the field can counteract the injustices made by a

complacent system and ultimately develop stoic administrators who will spearhead equity in the face of parochial mentalities regardless of the professional consequences (Berry-James et al. 2020).

Evaluation – Strength

Each argument in the book underscores the notion that higher education personnel should be bellwethers of racial inequity reform, not propagators of it. This is axiomatic via strategies furnished by the authors, which can be advantageous when pursuing reform. The authors detailed three distinct categories or typologies, namely 'Equity Talk and Equity Walk', 'Equity Talk, but no Equity Walk', and those that have no desire to possess either (McNair et al., 2019), faculty/staff can be placed in based upon their mentality toward and behavior pertaining to racial equity. As a black male educator working in higher education while concomitantly pursuing a doctorate in public administration, I agree with these classifications because I have learned from and worked alongside university personnel in each category. These categories provide a compelling contrast, which is beneficial because the stark differences are amplified by the authors' verbiage to illuminate said differences for those with 'blinders' or lackluster racial equity awareness.

Of these categories, the most salient are those that struggle with or have no desire for 'Equity Talk and Equity Walk'. According to McNair et al. (2019), practitioners with these maxims strongly believe there are no inequities in the current systems. Simply stated, they feel everyone has an equal chance to succeed and personal motivation is the determining factor for success. Such an ideology is connoted by many white Americans that strongly believe the personal, professional, and academic success African-Americans have experienced means the country is in a state of racial equity (Evans & Feagin, 2012; Berry-James et al. 2020). This mentality blatantly ignores the lived experiences of African-Americans, overlooking the various microaggressions and covert racism they endure in everyday life within the academic environment. University personnel that believe in illogical maxims are just one example of obstructions along the path to and threaten racial equity. Further, such maxims contradict the commitment to the field that requires administrators to stand up for good governance, social equity, and strong communities (Blessett et al. 2019). Academically, this entails supporting social equity in instruction, recruitment/retention, and service to the citizenry; practically this means supporting social equity in the development, implementation, and evaluation of managerial practices and policies (Blessett et al. 2019). This is salient for educators and administrators in the field because their teaching and research connects to individuals working in public and nonprofit sectors. Thus, cognizance of racial equity, social equity, and threats to them, are paramount for these groups because not giving these items the necessary attention can impact the appreciation of problems, formulation of public policy, and professional practice implementation (Blessett et al. 2019).

Evaluation – Weakness

The authors leveraged high-quality examples to illustrate points of contention about race, pervasive whiteness, and bias in various scenarios commonplace within academe. Some of the examples, derived from real-life scenarios, underscored specific lessons. My primary critique resides within the plethora of examples used throughout, resulting in redundancy. This might pose a challenge for the reader if they possess a novice level of understanding or experience regarding the subject matter. Readers possessing this level of knowledge may become overwhelmed within the example and ultimately become disinterested, resulting in key points being misunderstood. Given the contention surrounding the subject, the myriad of

examples was a 'necessary evil'. They provide various lenses for readers, especially those not cognizant of racial inequity, those not comfortable discussing equity issues, or those who refuse to acknowledge that said issues exist in modern society. Depending upon how the reader identifies racially/ethnically, the examples included can be viewed as either: 1. Extremely enlightening, potentially overwhelming, and/or uncomfortable or; 2. Emotionally exhausting, frustrating, and common-sense material. Despite these limitations, administrators and educators can utilize this book to pinpoint areas (e.g., student communication) where they can improve and learn the steps they should take to improve via examples of what is/is not equity-minded.

Conclusion

The assertion that the onus of advancing racial equity is on higher education administrators and faculty/staff, and not the students, cannot be overstated. Authors Dr. Tia Brown McNair, Estela Mara Bensimon, and Lindsey Malcom-Piquex accomplished their goal of providing a robust resource practitioners can use to arm themselves with techniques to advance racial equity and proactively thwart instances of inequity that occur every day. They emphasized student success, racial, and gender equity in STEM fields in pursuance of educational equity, all of which are pivotal in moving the equity needle. The authors personal experience(s) and research highlight the ways white privilege permeates higher education, and how institutional norms tailored to the dominant group are propagated on campuses, manifest in class assignments, syllabi, and practices that nullify the contributions of minoritized students. These experiences are transferable to the public and nonprofit sectors with especial emphasis on public administration teaching environments because public administration educators are critical of social services, the mediums of delivery, and benefits of said services.

Due to its transferability, this book should be an institutional staple and required reading within higher education as everyone, regardless of their race, higher education experience, or DEI knowledge base, could benefit from reading it. Many of the strategies furnished are generalizable to the public, private, and nonprofit sector organizations. What is most impressive is the authors were careful not to allow this generalizability to diminish the transferable strategies when applied to other industries. This accentuates the compelling call-to-action for higher education personnel to redress equity issues and bolster DEI initiatives so inclusive excellence can be leveraged positively, promoting organically sustained change and rectifying uncivil society. Higher education personnel must rise to the occasion and be the 'agents of change' necessary to redress racial inequity at each level. The pillar of equity has not been given adequate attention by public administrators and concerted efforts must be made to equip current and future administrators to combat the inequities within the educational system and society (Blessett et al. 2019). These efforts should begin with public administration departments, who can be the impetus of change on campus, as many public administration departmental personnel may possess the KSAs and methods necessary to facilitate change, and bridge gaps between administration and students to foster racial equity for minoritized students.

Author's Biography

Theodore W. Johnson, MPA, is a second-year doctoral student within the School of Public Administration at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) and is also an Instructor within UNO's Aviation Institute. His research interests focalize social equity and ethics,

racial and educational equity, and inclusion with especial emphasis on the recruitment/retention of racial minorities to advance equity and promote opportunities in aviation/aerospace and other traditionally underrepresented fields.

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