*Supporting Equity in Education for Underrepresented Learners*

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**Abstract**

Educational institutions lead in the construction and dissemination of knowledge. The responsibility of supporting underrepresented learners in their pursuit of knowledge includes proactive and collaborative action. Higher education was once considered a tool for social mobility but now reinforces the social and economic divide. Earning an education was a promise to level the playing field and help learners realize their potential and increase their opportunities for success. For some, gaining an education is their measure of success in social advancement. For underrepresented learners, access to higher education is a challenge. For those who gain acceptance to educational institutions, there are challenges to navigating the environment to access resources and maximize their academic achievement. Cultural competence is a necessary skill for enhancing the educational experience of the underrepresented learner. Cultural competence as a requirement for higher education faculty and staff can reduce the effects of marginalizing learners. Marginality occurs as populations are pushed outside of the margins of support structures. Marginalized and underrepresented populations need support in learning to navigate through some educational systems. Collaborative strategies are needed to reimagine educational success for underrepresented learners striving for success in higher education. Greenberg recommends actions for educational institutions to support underrepresented learners that include incorporating equity priorities in the institutional culture. This research was conducted to explore the barriers and challenges underrepresented learners may experience in higher learning. Strategies for overcoming the barriers and challenges include cultural competence for faculty and staff.

Keywords: Equity in Education, Higher Education, Marginalization, Underrepresented Learner

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**Introduction**

Educational institutions lead in the construction and dissemination of knowledge (Altback, 2003). Native American, Latino and Black students are among the racial and ethnic groups that have been historically marginalized and underrepresented as learners in higher education (Ellsworth et al., 2022). First generation and non-white learners are underrepresented student populations that continues to expand in higher education (Banerjee, 2020). The responsibility of supporting underrepresented learners in their pursuit of knowledge includes proactive and collaborative action. By 2045, it is predicted that the multicultural populations in the United States will become the majority and the multicultural groups will represent around 64% of the population in the United States by 2060 (Frey, 2018). Working towards equity in education for underrepresented learners is a matter of social justice (Turner, 2016). In the year 2017, even though 44% of adults aged 25 years old or older had attained a degree, significant disparities in educational in equity still exist (American Council on Education, n.d.). College completion rates remain significantly low for historically underrepresented students in higher education (Ellsworth et al., 2022).

Earning an education can aid in leveling the playing field and help learners realize their potential and increase their opportunity for success. For some, gaining an education is their measure of success for social advancement. Miller (2019) draws upon the work of Paul Tough and how higher education was once considered a tool for social mobility but now reinforces social and economic divide. The reality is that education as a tool was not intended for use by all. Admissions processes, financial aid models, hiring practices, and testing are some of factors that reinforce the inequities impacting students.

**The Problem of Equity in Access to Higher Education**

For underrepresented learners, access and success in higher education is a challenge (NCES, 2019). For those who gain acceptance to educational institutions, there are challenges to navigating the environment to access resources and maximize their academic achievement. challenges are magnified for members of underrepresented populations. Marginality occurs as populations are pushed outside of the margins of support structures (Akin & Neumann, 2013). Some marginalized groups learn to work within the margin and devise alternative methods of navigating throughout systems. Cultural competence is a necessary skill for enhancing the educational experience of the underrepresented learner (Whitman & Jayakumar, 2023).

Collaborative strategies are needed to reimagine educational success for underrepresented learners striving for success in higher education. Postsecondary institutions have a direct responsibility to support learners in pursuit of knowledge. Greenberg (2022) recommended actions for educational institutions to support underrepresented learners that includes incorporating equity priorities in the institutional culture. Cultural competence as a requirement for higher education faculty and staff can reduce the effects of marginalizing learners.

This paper will explore the barriers and challenges underrepresented learners may experience in higher learning. Strategies for overcoming the barriers and challenges include cultural competence for faculty and staff. Theories supporting the strategies will be explained.

**Significance of the Study**

Addressing the needs of learners in higher education is important to the construction of our global society and their impact in that society. To support learners, we need to understand their issues with access, their experience in belonging, and their teaching and learning experiences. Cuellar and Gándara (2021), revealed that administrator perception of promoting equity, accessibility of information, and consistency were key factors in ensuring efforts to address inequities in high education are successful. The perceptions of the faculty who serve underrepresented learners are critical to the learners' psychological safety and academic outcomes.

**Theories of Equity and Student Integration**

Two theories were researched to explore equity and learner support. The equity theory developed by Stacy Adams addresses and supports motivation of learners. Tinto's theory of student integration is a paradigm that depicts the basic requirements necessary for students to perceive a degree of fit, or sense of belonging, which leads to persistence. Conversely, it illuminates how student attrition becomes inevitable when student needs are unmet.

**Adams' Equity Theory**

The equity theory of motivation was founded by Stacey Adams in 1963 in response to the cognitive dissonance theory (Fowler & Brown, 2018). Stacey was a workplace and behavior psychologist. The original focus was on employee behavior and motivation. The theory has evolved to a model of motivation. Inputs and outputs contribute to the sense of equity. Learners want to be rewarded for their academic efforts at school. The equity theory addresses dissonance that one may encounter due to perceived lack of reciprocity by faculty towards the efforts of underrepresented learners (Hoffman-Miller, 2022).

*Mental Health*

Underrepresented learners may have some academic gaps that contribute to challenges while they are in higher education. Equity theory is useful in conceptualizing some of the invisible barriers that impact learning outcomes for underrepresented learners. Instructors, faculty, and staff actions may affect the cognitive, emotional, and social process for learners and the outcomes result in their levels of success as well as their emotional capital or self-esteem (Fowler & Brown, 2018). In higher education consideration of the impact of the people and processes within the educational institution is necessary to build collaborative institutional interventions for the success of underrepresented learners.

**Tinto's Theory of Student Integration**

Tinto's (1973) seminal work on student retention revealed three primary indicators of student withdrawal: academic ability, degree of fit, and institutional commitment. First-time students require additional support, and institutions have responded with strategies targeting engagement in the first year. The matriculation experience beyond the first year tends to be more challenging. Tinto's student integration theory emanated from Durkheim's 1951 theory of suicide, which proposed that suicidal ideation and behavior originated from perceived alienation and inability to integrate with society socially and intellectually (Claybrooks & Taylor, 2016). Tinto likened withdrawal from school to the withdrawal from family or society

observed in individuals exhibiting suicidal behavior (Tinto & Cullen, 1973). The argument held that students must experience a certain degree of social and academic integration with their campus to commit to the institution and persist to graduation. Tinto conceived that successful first-year students entered colleges with basic traits such as family background, motivation, individual characteristics, and ability. Further, the interaction between these inherent characteristics and the collegiate environment influenced student achievement; consequently, there is a symbiotic relationship between integration and achievement. As students acclimate to campus culture, their commitment to the institution is positively influenced, and their likelihood of persistence and academic success increased. Conversely, unsuccessful integration culminates in reduced goal and institutional commitment, and increased chances of withdrawal (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993).

Freeman et al. (2007) furthered Tinto's degree of fit or sense of belonging hypothesis through identification of five significant influences on student withdrawal: (a) lack of diversity on the campus, (b) lack of satisfaction with social life, (c) lack of emotional preparation for college, (d) lack of academic preparation for college, and (e) lack of satisfaction with experiences in college. These findings supported Tinto's 1975, 1987, and 1993 works on student integration by concluding that student satisfaction and preparedness for the college experience were the greatest deterrents to withdrawal. Tinto's paradigm is tried and true and remains the gold standard 50 years later. National data from 2022 reveal decreased degree completion (provide data), which could signal inequity for underrepresented learners. Gallup-Lumina Foundation (2023) noted in its 2022 report on mental health in higher education, 41% of students enrolled in a postsecondary education program considered stopping out in the six months prior to being surveyed, and 55% of respondents cited emotional stress as a reason.

The combination of equity theory and theory of student integration provides a thorough framework of intersectionality through which institutions can identify, better acknowledge, and advocate for inclusive environments conducive to grounding disparities for underrepresented learners. Collaborative strategies to support underrepresented learners are paramount to student persistence.

**Barriers and Challenges to Student Learning**

Tinto (1975, 1993) defined academic integration as students' academic performance, level of intellectual development, and perception of having a positive experience in academic settings, while social integration was defined by involvement in extracurricular activities and the presence of positive relationships with peers. Academic leaders, administrators, and faculty play a key role in students' academic and social integration through the choices they make pertaining to course offerings, program content and outcomes, teaching, learning, and assessment strategies. Academic and social integration not only rely on the appropriateness of these factors but also on a strategy that demonstrates awareness and advocacy for all students' needs.

*Cultural Competence*

The level of readiness for faculty to work with diverse populations has been an issue not often addressed in education. Faculty cannot give what they do not comprehend or understand underrepresented learners' needs. Educator belief systems may contribute to perceptions of a lack of intellectual abilities for culturally or linguistically diverse learners (Fowler & Brown, 2018).

## Psychological Safety

Conley (2015) insisted that a developmental trajectory is necessary for learners in higher education to foster academic success in student performance and retention. Lawless (2018) addressed the necessity of emotional labor for faculty and staff serving in higher education as higher education has shifted to the service industry. Emotional labor is effective work which includes making a student feel that they are competent. Communication and cultural competencies and emotional intelligence are skills needed for this working with underrepresented learners.

Adult learners may be experiencing unrecognizable trauma symptomology that appears invisible. Each learner must balance the pursuit of aspirational goals with daily responsibilities creating an invisible juxtaposition that is sometimes insurmountable. A student experience devoid of concern for individual student needs intensifies the learners' difficulties. Gallup-Lumina Foundation (2023, Feb) survey respondents characterized themselves as misunderstood and unsupported in their descriptions of disparate impact and treatment in postsecondary education. One in three students expressed feeling unsafe, psychologically and/or physically. Discrimination was noted to be prevalent in less diverse academic environments, namely private, for-profit schools, and short-term credential programs. Gallup respondents cited feeling ostracized by classroom practices devoid of Black scholarship or worldviews and argued that institutions did not appear to value nor practice inclusion. Contemplations of stop-out were further exacerbated by a lack of confidence that there would be a favorable response from the administration if they alleged discrimination by peers or faculty.

## Sense of Belonging

Institutions rely heavily on first-year orientation and retention-focused programming to improve retention. Orientation agendas for first-year aim to build community for the entire campus population and acclimate students to the campus, but specific inclusion strategies for underserved and marginalized students are not a focal point. Campuses may tout inclusive philosophies by catering to some subsets of the populations such as LGBTQIA+ students but a universal dedication to all populations is not present. After the first-term drive to campus acclimation, students do not have specially selected instructors or established class schedules developed to promote student success; they are expected to fend for themselves using the tools introduced in the first-year courses. This eye-opening experience results in a myriad of reactions from learners, ranging from poor academic performance to withdrawal.

National student college completion data for 2022 reveals Black students had a 44% 6-year graduation rate, the lowest of all racial and ethnic groups due to financial and institutional barriers (Causey et al., 2022). A key finding illuminated decreased degree completion among Black students. Qualitative evidence revealed two phenomena fueling Black students' withdrawal: balancing external responsibilities and racial discrimination (Gallup-Lumina Foundation, 2023). The challenge of maintaining a work-life balance while undergoing an educational pursuit lessens the likelihood of degree completion for Black learners. Twenty-two percent of Black students serve as caregivers (15% for adults and 11% parenting children under 18 years of age), and 20% are employed full-time (Lumina Foundation & Gallup, Inc., 2023, Feb).

*Technological Literacy*

Technology related access and competence correlate to student academic success (Banerjee, 2020). Technological literacy and access to technology are other barriers to success that often go unnoticed. Educators in higher education must consider the gaps in technology access and skills for learners who may be marginalized or underrepresented within their institutions (Banerjee, 2020).

**Addressing Academic and Social Needs for Underrepresented Learners**

One's ability to connect with the learner and support them academically and socially calls for a repertoire of resources and strategies. Some faculty and staff in higher education are not prepared for this reality and are not meeting the needs of underrepresented learners. Institutional strategic planning fueled informed by student data can be the catalyst for new academic programs for adults, equip the campuses to receive adult learners, and create an inclusive student experience in which marginalized learners can thrive (Tuset, 2022).

*Institutional Interventions*

Institutional strategy should envision a culture of continuous improvement that permeates all facets of the campus environment. Theoretical organizational mission should become action on display as a dynamic array of resources, skills, and strategies in three areas of focus: advocacy, multiculturalism, and social justice. *Advocacy* could promote a mindfulness to social and financial needs that may place learners at risk. Embodiment of *multiculturalism* would permit a swift response to threats/reports of disparate treatment. Commitment to s*ocial justice* would engrain a spirit of diversity and inclusion in mission, hiring, and curricula.

Bai and Pan (2009) denoted despite there being evidence that special interventions are necessary at the beginning of a student's experiences with higher education, strategies beyond the first year are scant. They suggested that higher education institutions implement audience-specific intervention programs in lieu of general orientation programs for the entire cohort. Conducting smaller sessions during orientation sessions could establish the foundation for inclusion and prompt proactive identification of underrepresented student needs previously unknown or unaddressed.

*Faculty Support Strategies*

Institutions can create standards that focus on faculty disposition and faculty readiness to work with and support diverse populations in teaching and mentoring roles (Halpern & Aydin, 2020). However, individual contributions from faculty are paramount to student persistence. Faculty, as the front line, must intentionally tailor teaching methods and classroom management practices to engage and support underrepresented learners. Adopting a philosophy of *communication* and mentorship should translate into practice, which can be observed through *modeling* and *mentoring*. Developing students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills will inherently *promote a mindset of growth, individuality, and collaboration* among students. Faculty should model the behaviors desired in students by creating safe spaces that allow students to exhibit individuality and share concerns without fear of reprisal. Providing clear, consistent statements of expectations, grading criteria, and feedback improves students' perceptions of equity.

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**Conclusion**

Successful postsecondary matriculation requires a navigation roadmap of the collegiate environment and a supportive village driven by a genuine desire for continuous improvement aimed at addressing academic and social needs for all learners. Celebrating multiculturalism fosters an environment where students feel free, accepted, and respected. Equity in the educational experience inherently involves awareness, acknowledgment, and celebration of multiculturalism. Mere acceptance is not enough. A heightened awareness of the specific needs of underrepresented learners must be followed with a systemic concerted effort.

Higher education institutions can make a social impact in society through their support of underrepresented learners. The equity theory and Tinto's theory of student integration support the research by highlighting the factors that impact students. Reimaging educational success for underrepresented learners calls for collaboration and partnership in support structures. The layers of collaboration include faculty development to support a diverse population and institutional interventions.

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