Centering Students in Higher Education Reform
The Why and How of Student Engagement

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> *"The history of education reform is a history of doing things to other people, supposedly for their own good."*
> *-- Benjamin Levin, Putting Students at the Centre in Education Reform*

Stakeholders across the higher education landscape have launched countless efforts to make higher education work for students, especially those from systematically excluded communities. Yet, reforms intended to benefit students often fail to center students in the change process. In Spring 2023, Education Equity Solutions interviewed 42 student leaders and staff across 14 advocacy organizations, higher education institutions, and media organizations in California to learn about the impact of student engagement in their change work and the necessary conditions for authentically and effectively engaging students[i].

Authentic student engagement is a powerful lever for systems change because it:

Raises awareness about the structural changes that are needed to advance equitable outcomes for students.

Students have critical insights about the issues impacting their opportunities and success. This is particularly true for students from systematically excluded communities who may have first-hand experience and a deeper understanding of the inequitable policies, practices, and resources many reform efforts aim to address.

Shifts power to those most affected by inequity.

Involving students in decisions that impact their education diversifies the decision-making process. This involvement can ultimately contribute to more responsive and equitable policies and practices.

Builds narratives that change mindsets and counter deficit-based thinking.

Rather than relying on people in positions of authority to interpret and represent students' experiences and perspectives, hearing directly from students, especially students from systematically excluded communities, creates counternarratives to deficit-based thinking that often drives inequities in higher education. [ii]

Principles of Authentic Student Engagement

We identified three main principles of authentic student engagement:

1. *Purposeful inclusion of students from systematically excluded communities,* including identifying and removing barriers to participation for students from those communities.

2. *Shared power with students, coupled with support and training,* to provide students agency to identify what needs to change alongside structured guidance on how to make change.

3. *Community and a culture of care,* where students' well-being and long-term development is given equal value to the impact of their work.

Intentionally recruit students from systematically excluded communities and remove barriers to their participation.

Recruiting students from systematically excluded communities—including students who are Black, Latinx, Indigenous, AAPI, low-income, first generation, LGBTQIA, and/or are undocumented—requires intentionality. Instead of an open call for recruitment, the organizations we spoke with rely on current student leaders and alumni, who have deep knowledge and connection with the communities the organizations intend to serve, to conduct outreach and provide support to new student recruits.

Successful organizations also understand the multiple barriers that can prohibit students from engaging in change efforts. They work to remove these barriers by adequately compensating students for their time, working around students' schedules, simplifying application processes, and waiving degree or experience requirements in job applications or fees for program and event participation.

The students we spoke with underscored the importance of being compensated for their time noting that without pay, they would have needed to work other jobs to meet their financial obligations.

> *"I was pretty frustrated that every opportunity students had to make a difference came at the cost of not getting paid, having to travel, having to add another thing to their schedule, and it didn't feel fair. So that's why I joined [this organization]. And that's why to me, it's really important that it's student led...because if we didn't value students, if we didn't pay our fellows, then we would be like a lot of these organizations that, their heart is in the right place but maybe don't acknowledge these students. It's hard to advocate for basic needs when your own basic needs aren't being met."*
> *-- Student Leader*

> *"I think institutions underestimate the value of student input. They bring them to the table and say, this is a student equity plan. It's three quarters of the way baked. We need you to say yes cuz it needs to go to the board of directors...students are not compensated; they are not onboarded on why this is important and how it is going to affect campus operations...and they only bring them in when it is a requirement."*
> *-- Advocacy Organization Staff Member*

Share power with students while providing training and support.

Power sharing means finding a balance between pre-set, long-term agendas and the new ideas and expertise students bring to the table. Interviewees noted that while a consistent agenda (particularly as students turn over) is necessary for effective long-term change, it is equally important to be flexible and adjust their agendas based on student input. Successful power sharing also includes anticipating and mitigating traditional power dynamics to ensure that students can freely contribute and offer critical perspectives.[iii]

Lastly, when sharing power with students, it is crucial to provide them with training that prepares them for the opportunity.[iv] While students have deep understanding of what needs changing in education and why, they can benefit from structured guidance on how to effect that change.

Create community and a culture of care.

Authentic student engagement necessitates creating an environment in which students' well-being and their long-term development are valued as much as the outcomes of their change work. The process of effecting change can be emotionally taxing, and often involves power dynamics that make it difficult for students to openly share insights or provide critical feedback.[v] Opportunities for peer-to-peer connections, mentorship from non-students, or even skill development can make the change work sustainable and worthwhile.

> *When we are talking about some heavy topic, we're talking about marginalized communities, about barriers...some of those topics really resonate and hit us a little bit harder because we relate to them...because community organizing is really stressful and it can take a toll on you, especially as a student. So, it's important to voice whatever you are feeling...because those feelings are valid."*
> *-- Student Leader*

REFLECTIONS

Deep-rooted inequities in education are held in place by multiple systemic conditions that manifest across individuals, institutions, communities, and the system writ large. To enact systemic change, efforts must span these various levels. Students—whether they are leading change or engaged by groups leading change—are powerful stakeholders, uniquely positioned to unearth obstacles to creating equity-focused change and offer narratives that challenge deficit-based thinking that drives inequitable policies and practices.

Our findings suggest that applying the principles listed here in student engagement opportunities not only leads to more enriching experiences for both students and organizations, but also fosters the necessary conditions for students to effectively contribute to change efforts. As such, authentic student engagement is critical in order to achieve higher education systems change that is responsive to students' needs and promotes racially and economically equitable outcomes for students.

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[i] All the organizations we interviewed were grantees of College Futures Foundation, and had received funding to engage student leadership or worked with student leaders as part of their higher education reform efforts.

[ii] Levin, B. (2000). Putting Students at the Centre of Educational Reform. *Journal of Educational Change 1*(2) & Salisbury, J., Rollins, K., Lang, E., & Spikes, D. D. (2019). Creating spaces for youth through student voice and critical pedagogy: The case of RunDSM. *International Journal of Student Voice, 4*(1), 1-10.

[iii] Klemencic, M. (2020). Students as actors and agents in student-centered higher education. In S. Hoidn, & M. Klemencic (Eds.). *The Routledge International Handbook of Student-Centered Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.* London: Routledge.

[iv] Holquist, S. E., & Walls, J. (2021). Power and adult support in student voice efforts for policy change. *Educational Policy.* 1-30.

[v] Klemencic, M. (2020). Students as actors and agents in student-centered higher education. In S. Hoidn, & M. Klemencic (Eds.). *The Routledge International Handbook of Student-Centered Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.* London: Routledge.

About Education Equity Solutions

Education Equity Solutions (EES) conducts research and facilitates learning to drive equity-centered policy change in higher education. We work to ensure education policy is informed by a deep understanding of research evidence and grounded in the experiences of students and practitioners, especially those from systematically excluded communities.