Introduction

The period in which wealthy white males were the majority student population in the United States’ higher education system is far from today’s reality. As higher education has diversified, institutions recognize that all students are not created equal, and support systems and resources must be established to continue increasing academic success. Institutions have championed their increased accessibility due to greater equality since the post-World War II period (Tienda, 2013). Although this is true to an extent, there remains a misconception that the opportunity to access higher education and increased diversity in the sector has created equity (Glater, 2016). Equity is a multifaceted issue in higher education, and institutions have been challenged to address and improve upon for over a decade.

Research illustrates that student affairs are critical in decreasing inequity on college campuses (Schuh, 2010). The primary purpose of establishing such departments within higher education was to address individual students’ needs and development holistically so that upon graduation they were “well-rounded, balanced citizens who had a foundation in education and social and moral convictions” (Schuh, 2010, p. 64). The rise in students’ racial, ethnic, economic, and social diversity has only emphasized the need for student affairs professionals and proven how essential their role is with students’ development and academic achievement (Henning & Roberts, 2016). The ever-growing complexities of students’ lives and their struggles, when enrolled in college, further illustrates the need for student affairs professionals to provide support outside of the classroom (McClellan & Stringer, 2016). In this way, student affairs are contributing to the decline of inequities across higher education institutions.

As the role of student affairs in higher education has become more prominent, assessing its effectiveness has been stressed. Although research indicates that such services positively impact equity gaps, institutions often receive pushback and criticism in establishing or enhancing their student support services (Henning & Roberts, 2016). The additional funding for new technology, staff, and expanded offices may be challenged by stakeholders, such as faculty, administrators, the board of trustees, and federal, state, and local governments (Owens, Thrill, & Rockey, 2017). These services must not only prove their effectiveness, but they should also illustrate they are worth investment funding.

Assessment plans, especially outcomes-based assessment plans, have become staples in measuring student affairs in higher education (Bresciani, Gardner, & Hickmott, 2009). As data-driven decision-making is now essential in higher education, funding is critical to institutions’ survival, and data has become a necessity in showing stakeholders that positive change is occurring (Henning & Roberts, 2016). The continuous nature of assessment promotes the concept of constant improvement to meet the students’ needs (Bresciani et al.,
Most importantly, institutions face the challenge of retaining more underprepared and at-risk student populations, and being responsible for providing support for student success. This would hopefully lead to higher graduation rates for all students (Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015). To accomplish this, institutions must understand the barriers and challenges that underserved and marginalized students face to better assist in their success. Institutions cannot provide students the necessary support without intentionally gathering data and assessing the services already in place (Gansemer-Topf, 2013). Therefore, creating outcomes-based assessment plans to measure the effectiveness of these support services is imperative in addressing inequities among student populations.

**Review of Literature**

**Equity**

**Definition**

Traditionally, equity has been defined as increased access to higher education for all society members (Tienda, 2013). If following this logic, the more diversity present across institutions, the more equitable higher education is, yet this definition does not reference the disparity in opportunities and societal stratification. Creating more diverse campuses does not mean students are provided the advantages and resources necessary for their success. In fact, it is the opposite. When accepting diverse student populations, financial resources, academic abilities, non-academic skills, and accessibility to off-campus assistance must be considered when thinking about potential academic success (Astin, 1990). Equity is a multidimensional term, referring to the assurance that all students are provided the resources and assistance necessary for their individual advancement, success, and mobility.

**History of Race and Ethnicity in Higher Education**

Racial and ethnic minority access to higher education did not begin to occur until after the Civil War. The federal government, wealthy White industrial philanthropists, White churches, and the Black community created educational institutions to assist in the learning of Blacks until the early 1900s (Gasman, Baez, & Turner, 2008). Yet, the stain of racism and segregation restricted where and what Blacks could learn. Black colleges and universities were often led by White administrators and faculty, or institutions were beholden to the White philanthropists investing in Black education for less than altruistic purposes (Gasman et al., 2008). However, since the seminal implementation of the Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954, several court decisions and policies passed encouraging and promoting broader access to higher education for minorities (Hirt, 2006).

As society further diversified in racial and ethnic composition, it became important to recognize and increase access to other minorities. The Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s helped establish progressive educational policies such as the Civil Rights Act (Thelin, 2004). Additionally, through the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA), Minority Serving Institutions (MSI’s) are recognized in assisting and eligible for funding to support racial and ethnic minorities’ academic achievement and ultimate graduation (Gasman et al., 2008). Even with
these significant efforts, the access and quality of education for minority students remain a
deterrent in their advancement and mobility.

History of Socioeconomic Status in Higher Education

The ideological principle that all students, regardless of their socioeconomic status, be
provided the opportunity to attend college is unique to American higher education. It was not
until the Morrill Act of 1862, established amid the Civil War, that the federal government began
to encourage the creation and the development of programs geared toward agriculture,
mechanics, mining, and the military (Thelin, 2004). For the first time, male citizens of lower
economic status were provided the opportunity to receive postsecondary education for
professional and economic mobility.

Similarly, the G.I. Bill, established in 1944, created unprecedented access to higher
education for non-traditional students and those of lower economic status (Thelin, 2004). The
bill helped double enrollments, and by 1946, the G.I. Bill enrollments surpassed 1 million
participants (Glater, 2016). This enabled many soldiers, mostly white men of non-traditional age
and lower socioeconomic status, to earn a degree and bolster their economic mobility in society
(Glater, 2016).

The HEA of 1965 also increased access to postsecondary education for those of lower
socioeconomic status. The HEA consecrated that college is accessible to all citizens, and “the
idea was that equity in opportunity is part of who we are” (Glater, 2016, p.92). The creation of
Pell grants and the establishment of loan programs through the HEA increased the college’s
economic attainability for many Americans. Such policies recognized that lower-income
students are in high need of support and funding. Yet there remains a critical gap in what the
government and institutions have addressed and what the actual needs of these students are.

Equity Gaps

Definition

Equity gaps are referred to as the concept of identified “pockets of underachievement
among discrete populations” (Klonoski, Barker & Edghill-Walden, 2017, pg. 60). As
diversification expanded due to increased access, it became clear that certain populations
achieved and graduated at lower rates than White students with a privileged background. To
address these inequities in higher education, organizations and institutions have worked to
establish, measure, and then shrink these equity gaps on college campuses (Klonoski et al.,
2017). As academic equity is the focal point of this study, this gap will be addressed further.

Academic Equity Gap

The academic equity gap, also known as the achievement gap, focuses on course
completion rates and degree attainment between specific populations of students (Klonoski et
al., 2017). Several faculty-driven initiatives, such as remediation, learning communities, and
embedded tutoring in courses, constituted best practices in lessening academic inequity (Kuh,
2008). However, as will be discussed, with student affairs increasingly impacting students’
academic success, several student affairs best practices are established to address academic
inequity (ACPA, 1994).
Earning an undergraduate degree “remains the best vehicle for social advancement and enhanced quality of life” (Klonoski et al., 2017, p. 61), yet graduation rates remain relatively low for underserved populations. Minority students and those of lower socioeconomic status are typically less academically prepared for college-level coursework than White students and those from higher-income backgrounds. For example, a study conducted in 2015 at Northern Illinois University illustrates that minority and low-income students are more at risk of not completing the required 100 level coursework. A general education foundations course, taken by nearly 1,500 students annually, had a total pass rate of 81%. Yet, only 71% of Blacks passed the course with an A, B, or C. As some institutions create initiatives to address these academic gaps, others have created additional barriers for students. (Klonoski et al., 2017).

Minority students and lower socioeconomic status students are more at risk of not meeting college readiness due to under preparation for college coursework (Mejia et al., 2016). In fact, “Latino, African American, and low-income students are disproportionately represented among those taking developmental courses” (Mejia, Rodriguez, & Johnson, 2016, p.5). In a study of the 2009-2010 enrolled students at California’s community colleges by (Mejia et al., 2016), 41% of Hispanic students enrolled in remedial coursework, whereas only 23% were college ready. Lower-income students were placed in developmental coursework at a rate of 71% instead of 46% who were college-ready. The study also pointed out the inequity in the composition of who passed remedial coursework. Of those who took developmental math, 39% of Asians and 30% of White students completed the course, yet 24% of Hispanic students and 14% of Blacks passed with a grade of C or higher.

In reviewing the academic equity gap, research typically focuses on graduation rates of underrepresented and underserved students. According to research by Cahalan et al., as of 2015, Whites were the largest group of students earning associate and bachelor’s degrees in America. Blacks, consisting of 15% of the population nationwide for 18-to-24-year old’s, earned 12% of bachelor’s degrees. Blacks did earn 15% of associate degrees in 2015, which suggests that although Black students are underrepresented in earning bachelor’s degrees, they demonstrate parity for associate degrees. Likewise, when reviewing Hispanic student populations and their degree earning rates, Cahalan et al. found a strong indication that they are underrepresented in associate degrees and bachelor’s degrees. Hispanics are 21% of the nationwide population for 18-to-24-year old’s, yet in 2015 they earned 18% of associate degrees and 13% of bachelor’s degrees. The data presented above solidifies what has been pointed out throughout this publication: that although a more significant number of diverse students are enrolling in postsecondary education, inequity in degree attainment remains a challenge. (Cahalan et al., 2017).

Student Affairs

Although academic initiatives and curricular modifications have been made to address the achievement gap, student affairs divisions also play significant roles in shrinking academic inequity (McClellan & Stringer, 2016). In fact, best practices in addressing the academic equity gap state the importance of including these services in institutional planning and initiatives. The AACU (2015) recommends that advising professionals assist students in planning a “course of study keyed to students’ goals, attentive to students’ life contexts, and help them achieve Essential Learning Outcomes” (p. 25). Additionally, as student development research has
postulated, students need to be addressed holistically. Research also suggests that “in- and out-of-class experiences are interconnected components of complex processes shaping student change and development associated with classroom experiences and pedagogies, coursework, institutional environments and cultures, and an array of out-of-class activities” (Levy & Polnariev, 2011, p. 13).

Student affairs’ mission and goals are intrinsically related to social justice (McClellan & Stringer, 2016). Such a commitment means that the work conducted by student affairs professionals should be designed to assist in equitable outcomes and students’ upward mobility. Therefore, it is the primary responsibility of student affairs professionals to recognize students’ developmental changes while enrolled in college and simultaneously ensure that these changes support their academic success and ultimate degree completion (Fried & Harper, 2018).

Assessment

Definition

Assessment in higher education is a complex and ambiguous term, with multiple definitions. The assessment basis focuses on what is being evaluated and who the assessors are (Ewell & Cumming, 2017). Assessment can be considered as “a way to make decisions about the effectiveness of programs and services or what students learn” (Henning & Roberts, 2016, p. 19) or “any effort to gather, analyze, and interpret evidence which describes institutional, divisional, or agency effectiveness” (Bresciani et al., 2009, p. 15).

History

Assessment is a vital activity performed by postsecondary institutions to remain accountable and further improve student learning. Evaluating student learning outcomes at the course and academic program levels is ingrained within higher education’s culture, structure, and policies. Consideration for assessing student learning outside of the classroom originated in the United States during the 1930s and 1940s when research started connecting student academic performance and motivation and how these elements increased students’ learning process (Bresciani et al., 2009). It was not until the late 1970s that researchers applied assessment to student affairs, and not until the 1980s when institutions utilized such assessments to track student learning within their non-academic departments (Elkins, 2015).

Researchers and higher education scholars such as Alexander Astin, Harold Bowen, Robert Pace, and Vincent Tinto developed conceptual theories and assessment models emphasizing the importance of student learning outside of the classroom (Bresciani et al., 2009). These scholars and other researchers contributed to the assessment movement in higher education throughout their careers by highlighting the importance of analyzing student learning and contributing to a data-driven, assessment-based culture. Their work impacted the sector, especially throughout the 1980s and 1990s, when assessment became more prominent. For example, the first assessment conference was held in 1985 and was sponsored by respected organizations such as the National Institute of Education and the American Association for Higher Education (Elkins, 2015; Hutchings, 1993).

In the 1990s, the AAHE Assessment Forum released a set of nine guiding principles and best practices for assessing student learning. The principles are as follows:
1. The assessment of student learning begins with educational values.
2. Assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time.
3. Assessment works best when the programs it seeks to improve have clear, explicitly stated purposes.
4. Assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experiences that lead to those outcomes.
5. Assessment works best when it is ongoing not episodic.
6. Assessment fosters wider improvement when representatives from across the educational community are involved.
7. Assessment makes a difference when it begins with issues of use and illuminates questions that people really care about.
8. Assessment is most likely to lead to improvement when it is part of a larger set of conditions that promote change.

These principles, established by some of the top assessment researchers in the nation, have become the foundational tenets of higher education assessment. In addition to the nine principles, the AAHE Assessment Forum declared that “assessment works best when, among other things, student learning was recognized as multidimensional and integrated and when members across the educational community, including student affairs staff, were involved in its implementation” (Elkins, 2015, p. 40).

**Outcomes-based Assessment**

Outcomes-based assessment is the specific form of assessment that will be examined as part of this literature review. This form of assessment is utilized by students affairs divisions to collect data to review departmental effectiveness, assess the results, and recommend enhancements and improvements (Bresciani et al., 2009). The primary goal of assessment is to document student learning or program efficiency to inform decisions further (Henning & Roberts, 2016). Outcomes-based assessment is an intentional process designed to be systematic for improvement of programs (Bresciani et al., 2009).

There are five main purposes of outcomes-based assessment in student affairs: “to improve programs and services, to tell a story about the performance of students and staff, to support decision-making, to advance the division, and to enhance student learning” (Brown, 2017, p. 12). Based on this, student affairs professionals can craft objective, logical, and thoughtful assessments highlighting their essential services for students (Brown, 2017). They can also use this data to advance their work in student success continually. Overall, “outcomes-based assessment, when undertaken effectively, yields tangible results that demonstrate where and how learning is facilitated and enhanced in the cocurricular collegiate environment” (Bresciani et al., 2009, p. 33).

**Student Affairs Assessment**

With these principles, the higher education sector in the United States continued to
emphasize the importance of assessment. State and federal governments encouraged greater use of assessment for accountability purposes, especially to evaluate and prioritize funding due to declining resources (Bresciani et al., 2009). As research surrounding assessment grew, higher education associations, regional accreditations, and state governments urged for more intentional student learning, ultimately promoting and implementing assessment of student affairs (Ewell, 2009).

It was argued that assessment could be used to illustrate the clear connection between student affairs, the services they offer students, and the learning and development of students (Elkins, 2015). In the mid-1990s, the Student Learning Imperative by American College Personnel Association stated that “student affairs professionals must seize the present moment by affirming student learning and personal development as the primary goals of undergraduate education” (ACPA, 1994, p. 5). The ACPA’s reasoning for this publication was that “higher education is in the throes of a major transformation” mostly as a result of “economic conditions, eroding public confidence, accountability demands, and demographic shifts” (ACPA, 1994, p. 1). In this sense, student affairs could strategically point their impact on students' academic success, and argue that they provided more than basic services or general information for students.

Assessments, specifically outcomes-based assessments, are the outlets in which student affairs can explain and illustrate efficiency in assisting with academic success and student learning (Fried & Harper, 2018). Since the 1990s, the use of outcomes-based assessment to measure student learning effectiveness in student affairs has grown exponentially (Elkins, 2015). As funding and resources continue to decrease, this form of assessment provides a lifeline for the student affairs departments across the country. Such assessment not only show the need for student affairs, but it also shows the impact on student learning and development and allows for continual improvement to better serve students (Bresciani et al., 2009).

Challenges

Although there are several benefits of outcomes-based assessment for measuring student development and learning, student affairs professionals face challenges when creating, maintaining, and examining the results of assessments (Henning & Roberts, 2016). Issues such as lack of available resources, continual assessment, time constraints, and biased professionals impact an assessment plan’s accuracy and quality. These challenges can cause assessments to be hindered and, at worst, never completed (Henning & Roberts, 2016), leaving student affairs departments without strategies to gather useful data to improve services and increase student achievement and equity.

Although key stakeholders in higher education realize the necessity of assessment and desire assessments to yield valuable data, there is also a lack of commitment from stakeholders to devote funding and personnel for student affairs assessments (Henning and Roberts, 2016). The Middle States Commission of Higher Education states that “human, financial, technical, physical facilities, and other expenditures are necessary to achieve an institution’s missions and goals” (2003, p. 59; Shipman, Aloï, & Jones, 2003, p. 336). When considering that assessment is not primarily devoted to measuring outcomes at the institutional level, nor at the department and program levels, the cost of resources and the time devoted to assessment causes...
hesitation by decision-makers (Shipman et al., 2003).

Student affairs professionals are typically tasked with assessing their respective departments, initiatives, and programming (Henning & Roberts, 2016). Since it costs more for institutions to hire professionals dedicated to outcomes-based assessments, the challenges of the tasks associated with assessment are put on those student affairs professionals already dividing out their time between student engagement, program development, faculty collaborations, and more (Owens et al., 2017). If an institution lacks commitment to providing the necessary time and resources as a means to ensure accuracy and the continuous use of outcomes-based assessment, assessments will be negatively affected and the results may not be utilized to their full potential.

It is vital that administrators, staff, and faculty involved in outcomes-based assessment are provided with this form of professional development. Without sufficient training to effectively create an assessment and then measure the results, there could be various implications (Henning & Roberts, 2016). First, assessment is an objective activity, and those conducting assessments should not have preconceived notions of outcomes (Ewell & Cumming, 2017). Additionally, the staff and faculty engaging in assessment need to recognize their biases and correct them (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Student affairs professionals and faculty engaging in assessment practices need to know how to create, interact with, and utilize decisions from assessment plans. However, they also need to be aware of their potential biases and how they can influence the assessment plans (Henning & Roberts, 2016).

A crucial complication that professionals face with outcomes-based assessment is its continuous nature. There are no definitive answers yielded from assessment, only “provisional conclusions” that “need to be consistently re-visited and tested in the light of newer evidence” (Ewell & Cumming, 2017). The results are incorporated in Ewell and Cumming’s (2017) “Continuous Improvement Cycle,” which establishes that, upon producing outcomes for recommended improvements, these improvements are implemented and then assessed as part of the cycle. Such assessments can be burdensome for institutions due to the resources, funding, and time they consume (Ewell & Cumming, 2017). The continuous cycle must be followed to commit to outcomes-based assessment and further enhance student learning and development. If not, previously gathered data loses relevance and no longer assists professionals.

Gaps in the Research and Significance of Study

Equity and Student Affairs Assessment

Equity and outcomes-based assessments are inextricably linked, and student affairs professionals should be utilizing outcomes-based assessments to illustrate their impact on shrinking equity gaps further. As outcomes-based assessments are tied to student learning and development, they are also directly related to college campuses’ academic equity (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). Student affairs divisions already utilizing outcomes-based assessments subsequently have an appropriately designed tool to measure their impact on shrinking academic inequity.

Over the past decade, research has linked equity to the practice of assessment in higher education. However, few researchers have linked student affairs assessments to equity, and
even fewer have researched the specific implications of academic equity gaps (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017). There are a few reasons for this, being the hesitation of student affairs departments to declare responsibility for student learning the main one of them (Elkins, 2015). Student affairs have changed drastically in the past century, evolving as students’ needs changed and increased (Henning & Roberts, 2016). Yet, even with the drastic changes to higher education and student affairs, there remains a reluctance to claim that these professionals also enhance students’ minds and skills. For instance, certain professionals claim that “learning is the purview of the faculty, that program outcomes are impossible to measure, or that focusing on learning takes away from the services or programs students need” (Elkins, 2015, p. 45).

As mentioned in the aforementioned quotation, while establishing student learning outcomes are essential to an outcomes-based assessment, they may also be cumbersome for student affairs professionals to manage and track (Elkins, 2015). Over the past three decades of outcomes-based assessment rising to prominence in student affairs divisions in higher education, few studies have illustrated the results of student learning outcomes connected to outcomes-based assessments (Jankowski, Timmer, Kinzie, & Kuh, 2018). Higher education conferences and publications stress the importance of outcomes-based assessment, champion the researchers and institutions developing these assessments, and current best practices and case studies to be replicated by further researchers (Elkins, 2015). However, they do not present specific evidence of student learning (Jankowski et al., 2018). The lack of commitment in recognizing student affairs as a division that fosters student learning on college campuses has been a deterrent to outcomes-based assessment and contributed to this field’s slow progression (Elkins, 2015).

This study seeks to assess the effectiveness of assessment plans, also known as meta-assessments (Walker, 1999). According to Smith et al. (2015), few studies use meta-assessment in their research due to two main reasons: the first cycle of assessment has not yet concluded, and second because the study focuses on the results of the assessment than the assessment plan itself. Resources or studies rarely discuss the findings of a meta-assessment after it is conducted. For example, a study directed by researchers at James Madison University established that there are communication issues between higher education professionals when establishing assessment plans (Smith et al., 2015). These issues arise when there are misunderstandings about the language, definitions, and structure of an assessment plan. Smith et al. (2015) suggest that conducting meta-assessment will provide direction and improvement on the development of assessment plans at institutions. They reviewed and categorized published books and articles related to the topic but delivered limited guidance about what meta-assessment should look like and how it should be conducted. Although the researchers identified apparent issues within the assessment and meta-assessment field, they provided no explanation in how or when meta-assessment should occur, or how results should be interpreted (Smith et al., 2015).

**Relevant Studies**

Many studies relating equity to assessment, were centrally focused on the learning that occurs inside the classroom. For instance, Klonoski et al.’s (2017) article, “General Education: The Front Lines of Equity and Inclusion at a Midsize Public University,” discusses the important
decisions made by a university to shrink academic inequity on campus. The two initiatives that
the college committed to were “the identification and elimination of academic equity gaps among
students from underserved populations, especially in general education courses,” and “the
development of an equity-minded campus culture that embraces diversity and serves all
students equally” (Klonoski et al., 2017, p. 61). The university did highlight its multicultural
centers on campus, yet the institution failed to further include these centers and student affairs
offices in its implementation of the initiatives (Klonoski et al., 2017). Students engage with
student affairs departments regularly during their academic trajectory. Including student affairs
professionals in the proposed initiatives would have acknowledged this and how essential
student engagement with student affairs is to increasing equity.

After reflecting on the academic equity gaps for general education at the university, the
individual colleges formed “equity teams, comprising faculty, administrators, and staff” to
establish specific strategies to shrink academic equity gaps (Klonoski et al., 2017, p. 67). None
of the strategies noted in the article referenced how student affairs can further support student
development and learning to lessen academic inequity. According to Klonoski et al. (2017), the
equity teams did note that diversity in the hiring process is significant “with particular attention
paid to faculty and graduate teaching assistants.” The university is also planning to create a
“faculty-led Center for Academic Equity to provide faculty with the knowledge, skills, and
resources necessary to effect meaningful change in the classroom” (Klonoski et al., 2017, p.
68). Although this article highlights essential work in higher education to address academic
inequity, it also ignores the roles that non-teaching professionals, especially student affairs
professionals, play in students’ learning and development.

The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment published an article in 2017
describing the importance of linking equity and assessment (Montenegro & Jankowski). The
authors critically pointed that “assessment, if not done with equity in mind, privileges and
validates certain types of learning and evidence of learning over others, can hinder the
validation of multiple means of demonstration, and can reinforce within students the false notion
that they do not belong in higher education,” (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2017, p. 5). Although
this is important to note, Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) link equity and inclusivity to
students’ assessment in the classrooms. In this context, assessment is referred to as student
knowledge and their demonstration of such knowledge. As important as classroom learning is
for students, the article does not incorporate an analysis of the knowledge obtained by students
outside of the classroom. It also misses mentioning the importance of equity within those
external environments.

“Connecting Assessment and Strategic Planning to Advancing Equity on Campus,”
published in 2017, did highlight the role of student affairs assessment with equity, yet it focused
on social equity, rather than academic (Brown). In this study, the primary purpose was to create
a culture of inclusion, therefore the university linked inclusion with the Student Affairs 2020
Strategic Plan (Brown, 2017). Within the strategic plan, it was noted that student affairs would
encourage inclusion by implementing approaches such as “a Diversity and Inclusion Certificate,
staff recognition, and active participation in professional organizations” (Brown, 2017, p. 5). The
Diversity and Inclusion Certificate was offered to university employees as a chance to “explore
strategic areas around diversity and improve their ability to contribute to the enhancement of
Southeastern’s welcoming and inclusive environment” (Brown, 2017, p. 5). Similarly,
recognition and participation in professional organizations also allowed for staff and administrators to receive professional development in diversity and inclusion issues. The primary reasons as to why the university linked student affairs division’s outcomes-based assessment plans to equity was to “understand staff perceptions of the strategic direction, gather baseline data surrounding staff practices related to inclusivity, and apply results to practice,” (Brown, 2017, p. 13).

This study is critical because it strengthens inclusion and can potentially improve a sense of belonging for students from underserved backgrounds. It also connects student affairs professionals to the arguments made in this work. Although the goal was to increase “equity through professional practice” (Brown, 2017, p.17), this research does not indicate the connection between how these professional practices can positively impact students.

Ann Gansemer-Topf (2013) wrote a thorough article about how assessment can be used to promote students’ academic persistence. She highlights the importance of students interacting with their environment as an indicator of increased retention and discusses ways of assessing these interactions. Seidman’s Retention Formula for retention and student success is reviewed in this study and includes “identification and interventions that are early, intensive, and continuous,” and the model implies that there are “strategies, programs, and services that, when provided to the student, should lead to student success” (Gansemer-Topf, 2013, p. 66). Although not explicitly stated, Seidman’s Retention Formula could easily strengthen the argument that increased engagement of student affairs professionals and students leads to increased student learning, retention, and academic success. The article ties assessment to Seidman’s Retention Formula, but it falls short in connecting retention and student success to academic equity. The study also does not mention specific examples of the work higher education staff and administrators do to foster increased retention and academic success, which ultimately leads to greater academic equity.

Achieving the Dream, a national organization devoted to equity and student success of community college students has done significant work and research in shrinking equity gaps (Torres, Hagedorn, & Heacock, 2018, p. 74). The organization created a “new form of assessment” which “is making progress closing academic achievement gaps and accelerating student success through a unique change process that builds each college’s institutional capacities in seven essential areas” (Torres et al., 2018, p. 74). According to Torres et al., (2018), to assist in assessment, Achieving the Dream created the Institutional Capacity Assessment Tool (ICAT), which focuses on teaching and learning, and support in non-academic areas. This tool also incorporates engagement and communication, strategy and planning, policies and practices, leadership and vision, and data and technology as essential areas to be reviewed. Incorporating these areas allows for a holistic examination of the college so that informed actions can take place to create a more equitable campus.

The ICAT is provided as a diagnostic tool and the foundational first step in assessing an institution’s impact on equity. Achieving the Dream then supports community colleges to take the next steps in becoming more equitable campuses and increasing student success (Torres et al., 2018). Although student affairs are not explicitly discussed in this article, it is included within the ICAT as an essential consideration in addressing institutions’ equity. By working with community colleges, Achieving the Dream has provided a tool to measure the impact of equity through assessments (Torres et al., 2018).
However, the ICAT and Achieving the Dream do have their limitations. Most critically, Achieving the Dream is an organization primarily for community colleges and, therefore, their services and resources are not accessible for the 4-year public or private institutions (“About Us,” 2020). This problem has developed over several decades. Since community colleges are open-access institutions, equity is emphasized because of the large numbers of underrepresented and underserved students enrolling (Owens et al., 2017). Much of the responsibility to address equity is laid upon community colleges. As previous studies have shown, 4-year institutions accept underrepresented and underserved populations, which also makes them responsible for addressing equity.

Conclusion

There is a need to study student affairs’ outcomes-based assessment plans that measure the services’ effectiveness in shrinking academic equity. It is important to recognize that, as higher education has become more diverse, the urgency to address inequity on college campuses has increased (Ewell, 2009). Institutions must address these equity gaps and further support the achievement of all students. The roles of student affairs divisions have adapted over several decades to address these barriers and assist student success (Henning & Roberts, 2016).

In reviewing the literature, the historical implications of inequity in higher education point out that as society marginalized certain societal groups, so did higher education (Hirt, 2006). Institutions are working diligently to expand their reach to underrepresented and underserved populations and correct the racial and immoral actions of the United States. However, these students continue to face challenges and barriers. It is vital that student affairs divisions measure their effectiveness in helping students from underrepresented backgrounds succeed, while also using outcomes-based assessment to improve these efforts continually. It is critical for higher education institutions to commit their resources to create equitable outcomes for all students (Schuh, 2010). In this way, with holistic and equitable intentions, student affairs divisions can improve and tailor their services so that there is effective support to increase student academic success.

References


