# *Understanding*

Equity-Mindedness

Education Committee of the UW System Board of Regents

University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh

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Vicki Washington, Associate Vice President

Office of Equity, Diversity and Inclusion

Equity refers not just to equal access, but to equal outcomes among all racial and ethnic student groups in institutions of higher education. These outcomes include persistence through developmental and basic skills education, transfer from two- to four-year institutions, and degree and certificate attainment.
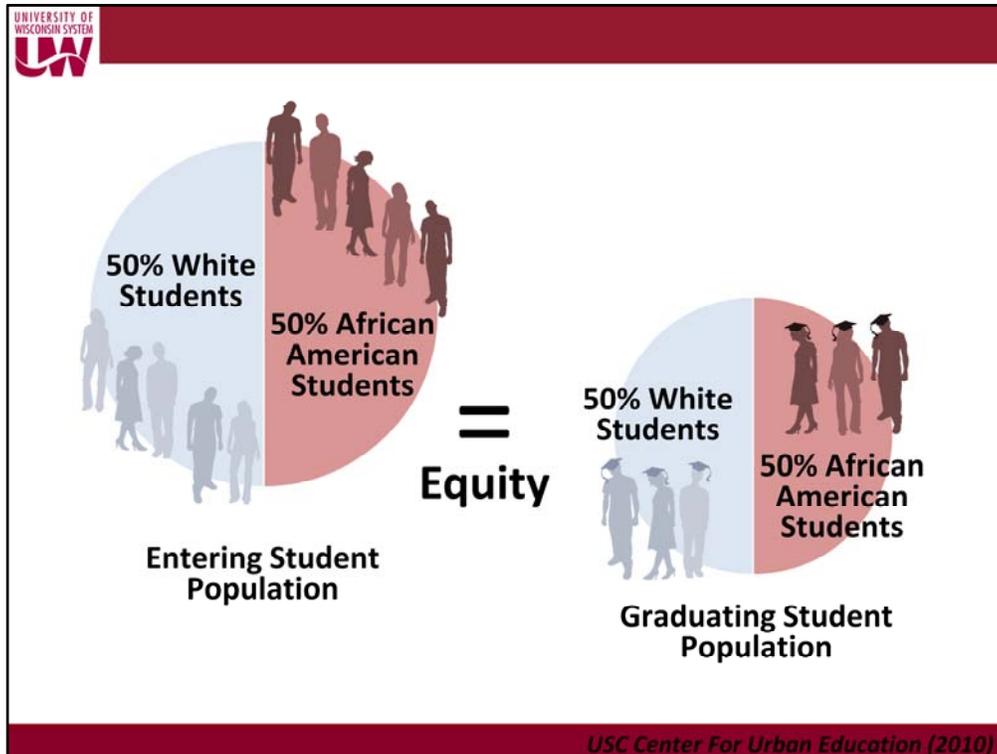
Here is an example of equity. If the entering class on a campus is 50% white and 50% African American, we would expect that the graduating class be 50% white and 50% African American, even if the total number of students graduating has decreased. When the representation of students graduating—an *outcome*—mirrors their representation in the student body—*access*—, then we have achieved equity for that particular outcome.

This example of equity in outcomes for students of color represents CUE's goal and not the reality of current educational outcomes in higher education across the nation.
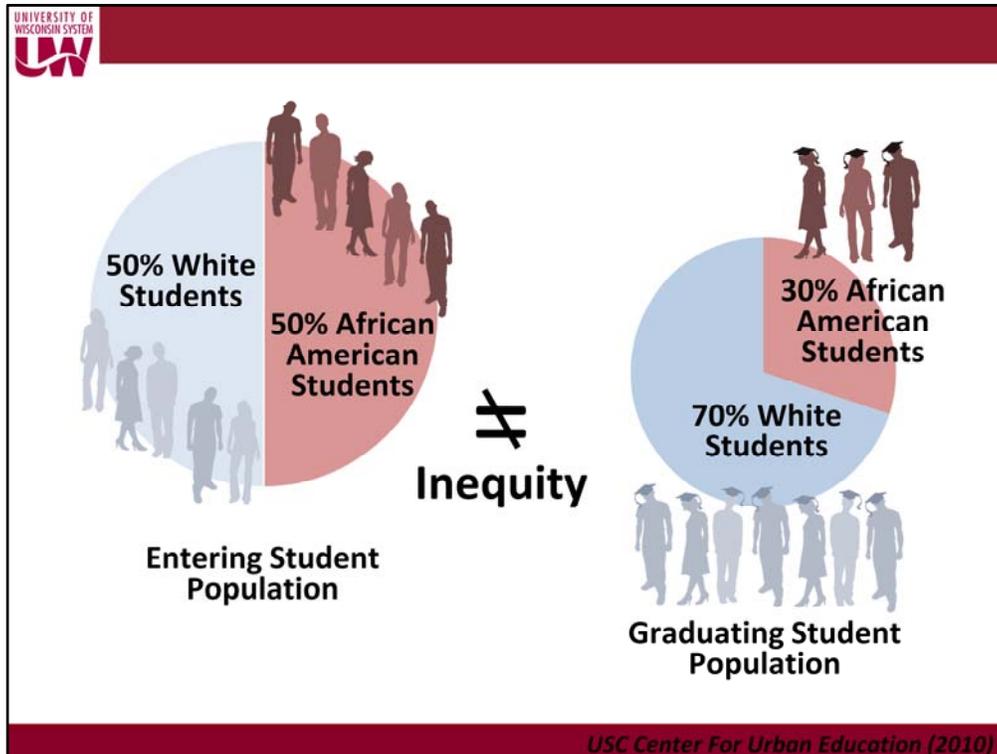
Instead, African Americans, Latinas, Latinos, and American Indian student populations maintain the highest likelihood of *not* attaining a bachelor's degree. This lack of higher education attainment equity between racial and ethnic groups negatively effects the entire nation through unequal employment rates and income, limited democratic participation in voting, healthcare access, and, even more disconcerting, the further ingraining of historic socio-economic inequities.

When people see unequal outcomes in institutional data, their discussions about it usually focus on the amount of effort students invest in academic activities. The successful and "ideal" students invest their time studying, seeking out faculty and counselors, and visiting tutors and help centers.

Other students are perceived and often judged as deficient if they are unengaged, don't take advantage of support resources, or rarely ask questions or seek help. For example, people looking at and trying to make sense of data demonstrating low academic success rates will commonly focus their attention on the student asking, *Are these students academically integrated? Do they exert effort? Are they engaged? Are they involved, motivated, or prepared?* Students who elicit "no" as a response often acquire the "at-risk" label.

At-Risk and "Deficit" Students

It must be because they are not exerting effort, seeking help, or feeling motivated.

Or because they are working too many hours, unprepared for college, or disengaged.

These explanations are harmful to all students

But most particularly to students of color

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The common logic underlying the notion of at-risk students goes something like this: "If students are not doing well it must be because they are not exerting effort, seeking help, and don't feel motivated, or because they are working too many hours, are unprepared for college, or disengaged." These explanations are not helpful. They are harmful to all students, but most particularly to students of color as they often, albeit unconsciously, reinforce stereotypical judgments. These student-focused explanations are also harmful to society as they not only allow inequities to continue, but they undermine any action to help students who are frequently unsupported and aided in the first place.

Cognitive Frame:
A mental map of attitudes and beliefs.

Determines:
• What questions are asked,
• What information is collected,
• What is noticed,
• How problems are defined, and
• Preferred courses of action.

… are culturally & socially transmitted, and developed through everyday practice.
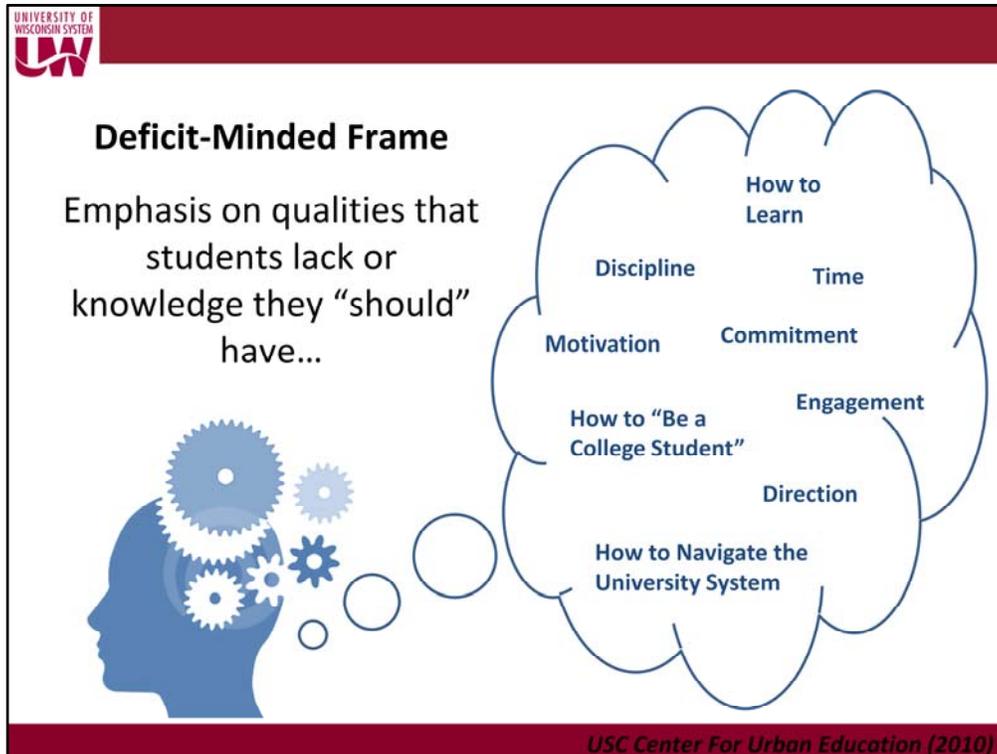
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These attitudes represent a cognitive frame—a mental map of attitudes and beliefs a person maintains to make sense of the world. A cognitive frame determines what questions are asked, what information is collected, what is noticed, how problems are defined, and what course of action should be taken.

Over the past ten years, CUE has studied practitioners' conversations about race and equity to understand what cognitive frames are commonly relied upon to understand inequities in student outcomes.

We have learned that cognitive frames are developed through everyday practices, are culturally and socially transmitted, and that practitioners use them in their everyday practices. We also observed that the dominant cognitive frame leads to a deficit-minded approach – a perspective that places the responsibility for unrealized success solely on students.

For example, we saw that the academic model socializes faculty members, regardless of race, ethnicity, or gender, into the dominant culture of their profession, department, and institution. This socialization leads to the common expectation that students will come prepared with the basic skills and knowledge required to be an effective learner. These practitioners—in four-year and two-year institutions—often take for granted that students who go to college know the practices of being college students.

Deficit-Minded Frame

Emphasis on qualities that students lack or knowledge they "should" have...

How to Learn

Discipline Time

Motivation Commitment

Engagement

How to "Be a College Student"

Direction

How to Navigate the University System

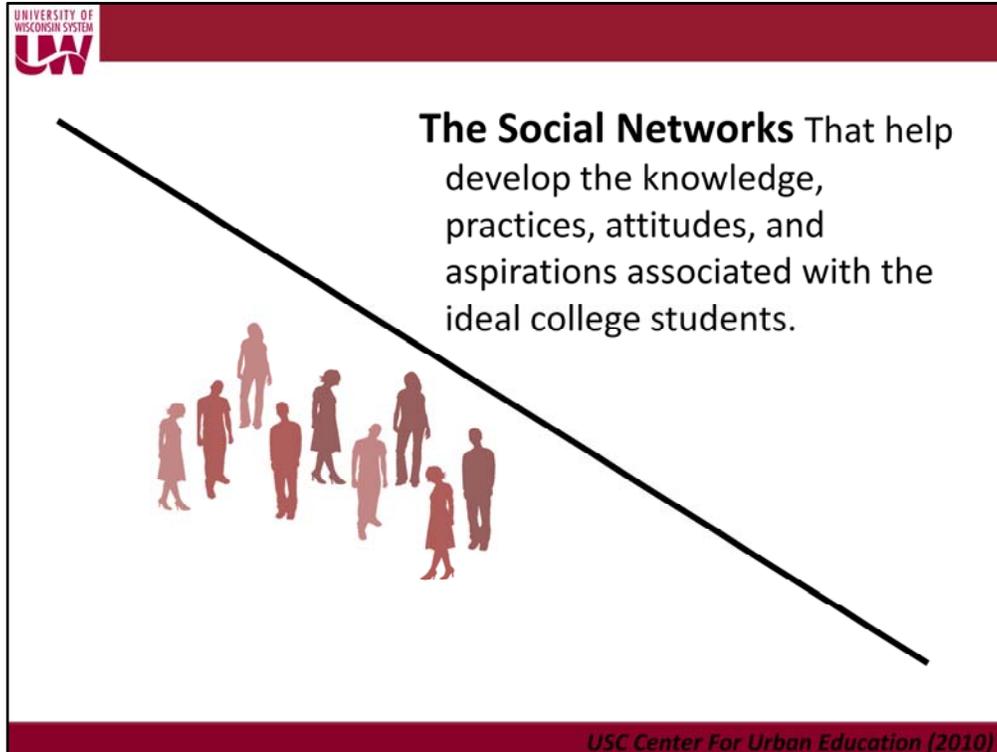*USC Center For Urban Education (2010)*

The list that was just displayed contains only some of the shifts in perspective that are implied by Inclusive Excellence; there are many others. When viewed in total, all of these shifts in perspective represent a change in our overall framework of thinking—moving from a deficit-minded framework towards a more equity-minded framework of thought.

DEFICIT MINDED:

CUE has observed that the dominant cognitive frame leads to a deficit-minded approach—a perspective that places the responsibility for unrealized success solely on students. The deficit frame posits that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficits (such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations) or shortcomings socially linked to the student, such as family dysfunctions or deficits.
- Deficit thinking blames the student for unequal outcomes.
- Students are responsible for inequities in student outcomes
    - Self-inflicted or natural "cultural stereotypes" = differences in educational outcomes
    - Inadequate socialization
    - Lack of motivation and initiative
    - Poor preparation for college work (K-12)
    - Programs that attempt to "fix" the student
    - A problem without a solution

The Social Networks That help develop the knowledge, practices, attitudes, and aspirations associated with the ideal college students.

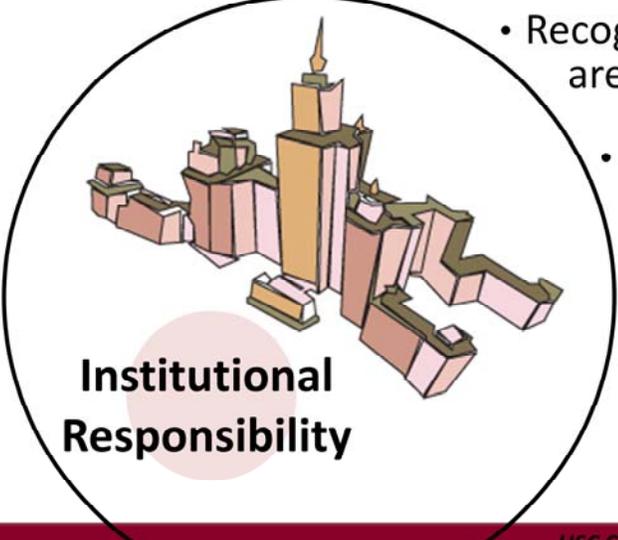USC Center For Urban Education (2010)

In reality, a very large numbers of students, particularly underserved minority students, do not have access to the social networks that can help them develop the knowledge, practices, attitudes, and aspirations associated with the ideal college student. This lack of social networks and knowledge leads many students to start college in courses that do not earn them college credits, not to seek help when they run into trouble, rarely to talk to their instructors, to spend as much time at work as they do in school, and often to seem unsure of their goals or what they need to do in order to make them happen. These students are not an exception. In many colleges, particularly community colleges and four-year colleges with open admissions policies, they are the modal student.
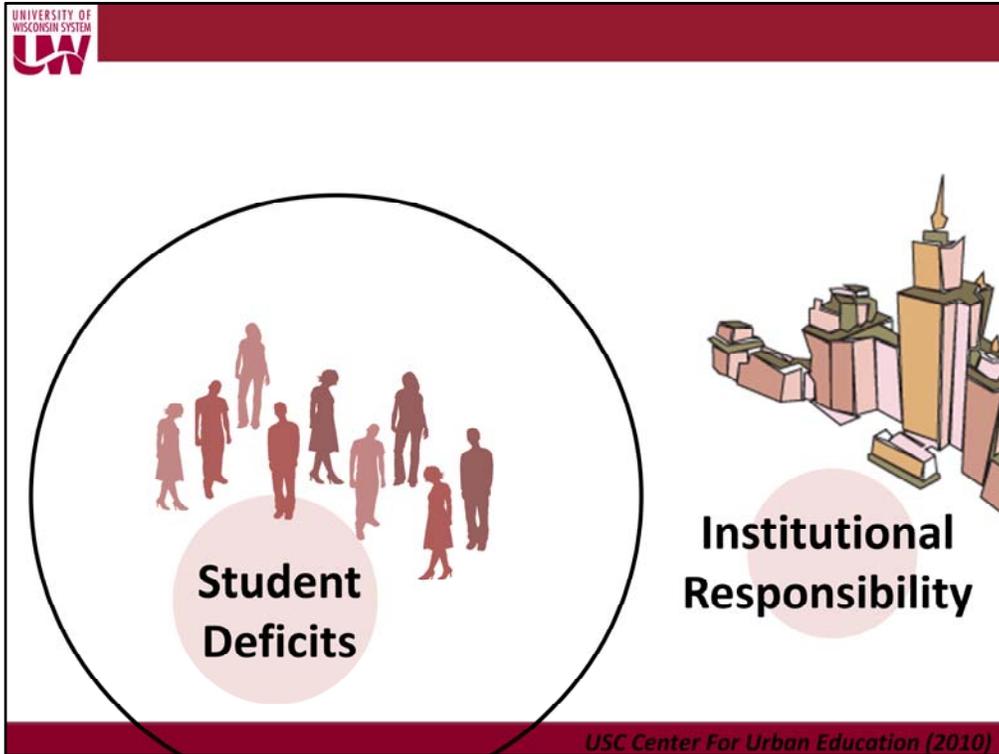
To address this, CUE helps practitioners, like yourself, reframe the discussion of unequal outcomes from an emphasis on student deficits to a matter of institutional responsibility.

Practitioners can make a difference in educational outcomes of underserved students if they:
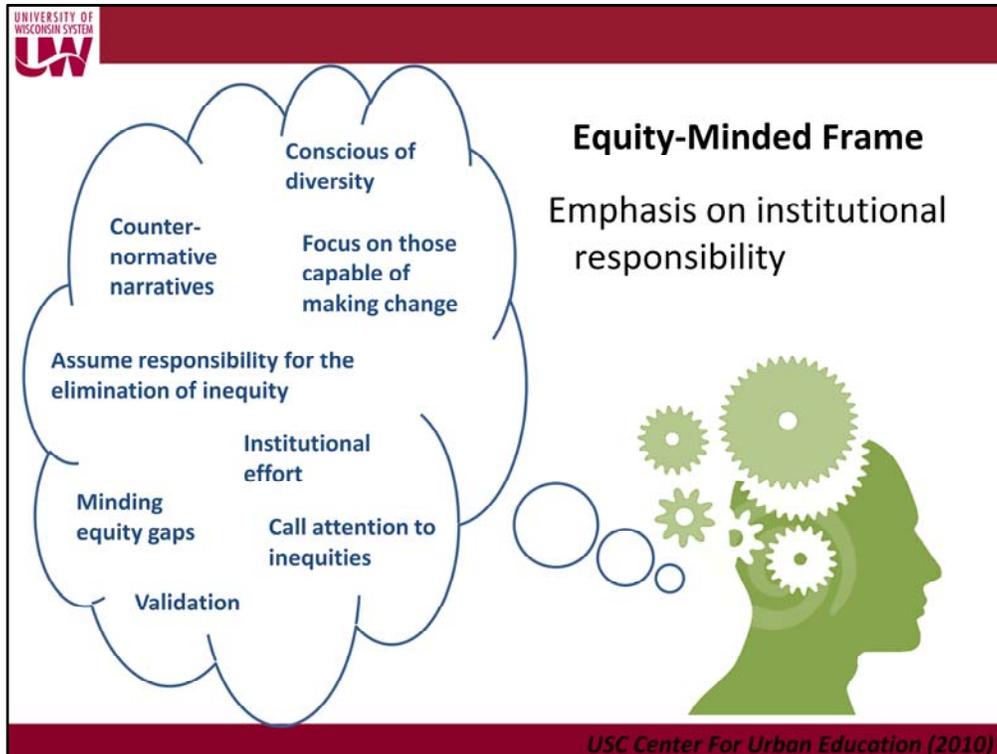
- Recognize their practices are not working
- Address the reality of students
- Focus on how they can improve their policies and practices

Institutional Responsibility

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Faculty, administration, counselors, and other people in positions to make changes can make a marked difference in the educational outcomes of underserved students if they are willing to recognize where their practices are not working and address the reality of their students, rather than the students they think they should have.

This isn't to say that students have no responsibility in their educational outcomes, but engaging in deficit-mindedness places the responsibility solely on students, and the expectation for change and action is placed only in the students' control. Reframing the discussion empowers the institution and allows practitioners to focus on how **they** can improve policies and practices to improve student outcomes.

Equity-Minded Frame

Emphasis on institutional responsibility

Conscious of diversity

Counter-normative narratives

Focus on those capable of making change

Assume responsibility for the elimination of inequity

Institutional effort

Minding equity gaps

Call attention to inequities

Validation

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EQUITY MINDED:

Instead, we must move to the Equity Frame. Equity-mindedness involves data-driven inquiry into student outcomes, new and intensified awareness of identity-based inequities as institutional problems, and personal and collective responsibility for achieving outcomes. Equity thinking promotes robust discussions about gaps in student outcomes because it focuses attention on factors within the realm of institutional control. Even if we are unable to control students past experiences, practitioners in institutions can help them have success in college.
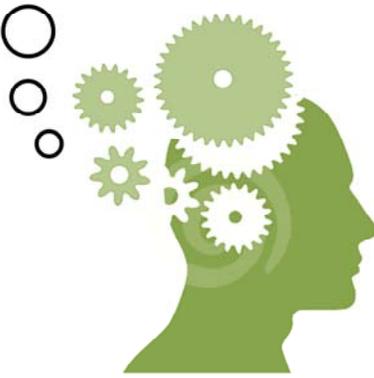
"Equity-mindedness" is essential to the success of Inclusive Excellence.

Equity-Minded Practitioners:

- Call attention to inequities,

- Assume responsibility for the elimination of inequities, and

- Focus on the practitioners capable of making change.

EQUITY-MINDED Cognitive Frame
Practitioners and institutions are accountable

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To bring about institutional transformation for equity and student success, CUE aids practitioners, including institutional leaders, to develop new, equity-minded cognitive frames.

An equity-minded practitioner calls attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes by race and ethnicity, is willing to assume personal and institutional responsibility for the elimination of inequity, and focuses on administrators, faculty, staff, and institutional capacity for making change. Thus, from an equity standpoint, institutions and practitioners themselves are viewed as accountable for finding solutions for students' learning problems.