

Institutional policies can be more equitable with systematic solutions

BY ASHLY CARGLE-THOMPSON

As theological institutions, we are charged with creating space for difficult conversations. We value the prophetic voice. We believe in the necessity of justice and the power of grace. But, despite our shared mission, we struggle to develop policies and initiatives that successfully address inequities in our own communities.



I have a theory. We do not fall short in this area because we lack compassion, or knowledge, or resources—we fall short because we are afraid. As individuals, we fear being held solely responsible for a flawed system. As institutions, we fear being held to an impossible standard. But, above all, we fear that we will be abandoned for admitting these truths—we fear losing our communities. So, we stop just short of confession, instead framing systemic injustice as an external threat that sometimes manages to breach our walls. We focus on managing breaches instead of acknowledging the ubiquity of oppression, thus beginning an endless cycle of policy revision and toothless initiatives.

How do we escape that cycle? Acknowledging complicity and accepting accountability for change are necessary first steps, but what comes after that? In my experience, systemic problems demand systematic solutions.

Shortly after I was hired as Candler School of Theology's associate director of admissions and financial aid, I decided that achieving financial aid equity would be one of my core initiatives. I was specifically interested in developing scholarship structures and policies that would reduce the racial funding gap. Five years after identifying scholarship awarding as a point of

inequity—and with the enthusiastic support of the leadership team—Candler's racial funding gap is 93% closed.

While five years is a blip on the timeline of institutional change, it is a substantial chunk of time in the scope of a career. Systemic change takes time, and it is critical to maintain focus and momentum through every stage of the project. Over the years, I have refined my approach to this work and devised a 5-step method to developing initiatives towards equity.

1 Identify

Achieving equity can feel like an impossible goal, so it is easier to focus on one thing at a time. Identify trends and patterns that might signal inequitable practices. Is your data perennially lopsided in a particular area? Identify the processes and policies that inform the outcomes captured in those trends and focus on those.

This can be a difficult step, especially if you have to present your findings to leadership. It is hard to accept when systems fall short, even more so, when calling attention to inequitable practices or outcomes. But, remember, you cannot fix what you cannot name.

2 **Interrogate**

As you work through your draft, ask yourself:

- Who is being prioritized?
 - ◆ Students?
 - ◆ Administration?
 - ◆ Faculty?
- What is being prioritized?
 - ◆ Finances?
 - ◆ Student Success?
 - ◆ Academics/Curriculum?

This exercise helps you keep track of the core objectives of the policy and helps you reroute if you find yourself centering the wrong group.

Keep your own biases and assumptions in check. Remember that, someday, you will not be the person responsible for this initiative, so it should be designed to minimize the impact of personal interpretation and biases.

3 **Collaborate**

Because our institutions are composed of different offices and personnel with overlapping interests, none of our policies exist in a vacuum. A financial aid policy has academic implications, academic policies

impact student life, etc. Developing a task force or working group ensures that you are considering the collective implications of your new initiative.

4 **Propose**

In most institutions, new policies or initiatives must be approved by various groups and stakeholders, often with competing interests. It is helpful to map out how your proposal can improve outcomes for multiple constituencies. For example, your CBO might want to know about potential financial benefits, while the faculty would be interested in how it improves student success, while the admissions office wants to think through how it can be used as a recruitment tool.

5 **Patience**

While incremental change can be frustrating and tedious, the reality is that higher ed is not designed to accept and execute systemic shifts in a few months. So, it's important to have a realistic timeline for your project. Breaking the proposed roll out into phases will help keep you and your stakeholders engaged and on track.



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