Transcript - ASU Remote 2022:
Structure your Department for Equitable Outcomes

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NORMA HOLLEBEKE: Hello, and welcome to Remote-- the connected faculty summit. I'm Norma Hollebeke, Manager for Network Programs and Services with Every Learner Everywhere. And I will be moderating today's session.

This 90-minute ask the experts block is sponsored by Every Learner Everywhere-- a nonprofit network that advocates for and supports institutions in achieving equitable outcomes in US higher education through advances in digital learning.

As I mentioned, the title of this next session is structure your department for equitable outcomes. And in this session, Jessica Rowland Williams talks about various tools and strategies for transforming a department to be more equitable through forming an equity advisory board, engaging an equity coach, undergoing equity training as a unit, and conducting an equity audit.

To introduce Jessica, she is the Director of Every Learner Everywhere-- a network organization with a mission to help institutions use new technology to innovate teaching and learning and better serve Black, Latinx, and Indigenous students, poverty affected students, and first generation students. As director, she provides leadership and vision for the network and leads the operation of the network strategy.

Jessica earned her bachelor's degree in biology from Spelman College and earned both her MA and PhD in molecular biology from Princeton University. Through her personal and educational experiences, Jessica developed a passion for improving student outcomes among underrepresented, minoritized, and poverty affected students. Jessica has devoted her career to expanding access, increasing graduation rates, and promoting student success among students of all socioeconomic backgrounds. Jessica, the mic is yours.

JESSICA ROWLAND WILLIAMS: Hi, Norma. Thank you so much for that introduction. And welcome everyone to this session. As Norma mentioned, I am the Director of Every

Learner Everywhere and I'm so excited to talk to you a little bit about structuring your department for equitable outcomes, but also I want to start, of course, by telling you a little bit about our incredible organization and who we are and what we do.

So Every Learner Everywhere is a network of organizations. We have 12 partner organizations that work together and have expertise in evaluating and implementing and scaling and measuring the efficacy of educational technology.

They work on curriculum and course design strategies. We also work on equitable teaching practices. And we build support services that support faculty and institutions in implementing equity-focused instruction, specifically when it comes to teaching racially marginalized of students and blended in online learning environments.

Our network works collaboratively to dismantle systemic racism and to de-center whiteness in higher education by building capacity in colleges and universities to remove those structural barriers that we know are creating challenges for students in the classroom.

And we remove those structural barriers through digital learning tools. Through our technical assistance, our research, our publications, we take a systems approach to centering equity and racial justice. And we truly do believe that equity work is the responsibility of the entire campus community, and not just an individual instructor making choices around their own teaching.

And so this work that we started began in 2017. So I know a lot of us-- a lot of folks are kind of new, quote unquote, "to digital learning" because of the pandemic and online teaching and learning. I think the point that was just made about the difference between emergency remote teaching which is something that we've all been pushed into versus intentionally designed online pedagogy, which is completely different or has been conflated.

And the work that we're doing, which is really more focused on that intentionally designed pedagogy that leverages digital tools is something that we started long before COVID-19. And when we started this work, we began with a focus on adaptive courseware specifically.

One of our first major projects as the network was done in partnership with Achieving the Dream and also the Association of Public Land Grant Universities or APLU, which are two of our partner organizations.

And the goal of the project was to support 12 institutions in the redesign of introductory courses using adaptive courseware. And through that project, we were able to work with these 12 institutions over the course of five semesters. And it resulted in the redesign of 193 sections of 62 courses.

Those courses were taught by a total of 432 instructors, and ultimately impacted almost 25,000 students. So a very small seed project that actually ended up having a really great impact, which I think really illustrates the power of digital learning in the ways that you can transform the experiences of students at scale through the use of digital tools. It's also important to note that most of those pilot sections were in chemistry and biology.

So, as you might imagine, the demand for our work over the last several years, couple of years specifically has increased significantly, especially as faculty and institutions and colleges across the country were struggling to both deal with the implementation of digital tools in the classroom and also grapple with what that means for racially marginalized students and also poverty affected students.

Again our work really centers at the intersection of equity and racial justice, implementation of digital tools, and also evidence-based teaching practices. We have now served over 600 institutions in 50 states and in 14 countries.

And currently our work is focused on building and promoting digital learning solutions that center the effective and interpersonal and situational needs of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and poverty affected students.

And we do this in three primary ways. First, by positioning Black, Latinx, Indigenous, poverty affected students, and those who share their lived experiences as experts and incorporating their voices in all aspects of our work and research.

The second thing that we do is we provide the field with solutions and tools and services that support the race and equity conscious implementation of digital learning tools. And of course, thirdly, we collaborate across network partners who share our equity focus and advocate for racially marginalized communities and value diversity in network representation.

And so one of the major things when doing this work-- when doing equity work in general, whether you're doing it at an institutional level or department level or even an individual course level that a lot of people run into is translating the why into the how.

Sometimes you'll come to talks like these or sessions like these
and get really inspired and feel that you want to make change and you understand why
it's important to make the change. But then the question is, what do I do tomorrow?
What do I do now? What can I change? How do I actually take that first step?
And so that's one of the central aspects of the work that we do is really supporting
institutions, department chairs, faculty, and thinking about how you take that initial next
step. And we do that in three ways. First, we design and deliver services that support
institutions in doing that. We also develop a series of resources.
And we also, lastly, share experiences and insights across institutions. And so for the
rest of the talk today, I really want to share with you some of the expertise and insight
that we've gained around how to restructure a department in a way that's more
equitable.
Of course, the first thing we know is that creating these types of environments--
academic departments that are equitable, is not something that happens overnight, but
something that takes a lot of work and requires a lot of support and resources.
And so the first thing that I want to do is point you to this incredible resource that I'm
going to talk a little bit about today, but in no way can I capture the rich depth of this
resource. So please check it out if your free time or in your spare time If This is a topic
that's particularly of interest to you.
I want to highlight-- I didn't put it on the slide, but I'd be remiss if I didn't highlight the
four authors of this resource who are Tynan Gable, Tia Holliday, Patricia O'Sullivan, and
Dr. Jeremiah Simms, all incredible practitioners and scholars in their own rights. And
they were the ones who contributed to this incredible, incredible work.
What we've learned about departmental equity, of course, is that improving equity in a
department first starts with an acknowledgment of where inequities exist in the
Department, and a commitment to actively working to address those inequities.
Designing a department that is going to be equitable requires intentional steps to
identify and analyze the institutional practices and policies that may be driving
inequitable outcomes for racially minoritized and poverty affected students.
Often, the policies and the practices and the procedures of a department that proved to
be the most inequitable and the most harmful have often gone unquestioned,
oftentimes for decades by the institution, because I think we always have to remember

that, higher education in our country, unfortunately, is inherently White supremacist, and by default, anti-Black, anti-BIPOC, anti-poor.

And so we recommend that the first step to building a more equitable department is a departmental equity audit. When we fail to acknowledge the harm that's caused by our own institutional policies, practices, procedures, pedagogies, et cetera, we create environments that lead to disproportionate academic struggle for our students.

So it really starts with knowing. And so step one, of course, of this departmental equity audit is to collect baseline historical data to understand the nature and the scope of potential equity issues.

And there are a number of ways that you can do this. I think the first huge caveat here is we need to start by assessing student learning outcomes. However, the caveat is that data alone, particularly quantitative data alone, is very limited in the stories that it can tell.

And when we focus only on the gap between student learning outcomes of White and minoritized students, what we're doing is we're normalizing whiteness and we're continuing to measure minoritized students against whiteness.

And so while we recommend that you start with assessing learning outcomes, we're also saying don't just stop by saying, well, all the Black students are underperforming compared to White students. We've got to go a little bit deeper. We've got to think about how we can frame the problems differently.

Specifically, what we recommend is whenever possible, disaggregate data points such as retention, persistence, DWI rates, enrollment status by race, gender, and income. So always disaggregate as much as possible by race, gender, and income.

Secondly, we recommend to be mindful of the intersectionality of identities of race and income that sometimes are only revealed after having discussions with students themselves. This is important because no student is just Indigenous or just Black. But we know that there are all types of identities that work together to form who a person is and what types of lived experiences that they experience on a regular basis.

Thirdly, we recommend that whenever possible, you collect qualitative data by really centering students' voices and experiences in the design and the evaluation and the interpretation of the data points.

The second step, of course, in understanding the scope of the potential equity issues, is identifying which courses in your department are gateway courses. The reason this is

important is because we know that gateway courses, which are

those introductory courses to a particular discipline, that provides students with foundational skills and knowledge that they're going to need to continue in that particular major.

When students don't do well in these courses, these introductory courses, these gateway courses, they are far less likely to ever attain a degree. So these are the courses that you want to pay the most attention to because research has shown that student performance in these courses is most critical.

The third thing, of course to do is to start to gather quantitative and also qualitative data at a department level and also at an institutional level. Some examples of the data that you would want to include in your equity audit, of course, are drop fail with draw rates and gateway courses, enrollment rates, particularly in gateway courses, persistence rates, transfer rates.

And, of course, you want all this data disaggregated by race, gender, Pell eligibility, first generation status, demographic data on departmental majors, along with course level data from digital learning tools such as adaptive courseware and the institutional LMS at whatever the LMS is at your institution.

And then, of course, don't just stop at the quantitative data. You really also want to start to gather as much qualitative data that you can to include in this audit. And that might include things like departmental policies for majors and satisfying major requirements or departmental policies for non-majors, course policies that are set by faculty, including policies for attendance and due dates and testing.

And it's also important to understand what resources are available for students when they need help with assignments and communication. Policies for tutoring and supplemental instruction are important to know. Faculty office hours are important to know.

Any surveys that faculty have done or surveys of students are important to gather. And then, of course, any focus group data that you've engaged in or done, as well as institutional student evaluations of instruction.

And if you don't have all of these things, that's fine. But these are the types of things that you want to gather when starting this institutional audit process-- I'm sorry, this departmental audit process.

So next step, you've got all this information. You've got it all in one place. What's the next thing you do? Of course, you need to interpret all of this information. What does this mean? What is it telling us? And this is the type of thing that has to be done in community. Oops, sorry.

And the reason why this is done in community is because naturally, every single person involved is going to bring their own biases to the data interpretation, which is why it's important to seek a variety of perspectives.

Ultimately, the key approach here is to focus on actionable and equitable solutions that you have control over versus things that you don't have control over, like student behavior. And so who do you bring in? You bring in specialists. Those can be folks like data analysis in your IRR department, DEI specialists, learning science specialists, student support professionals.

You also bring in students. Student input is very important because it helps to prevent assumptions being made about their behavior or their capability or their motivation. A lot of times, we're all guilty of, oh, well, students, they just don't or they just-- we have all these assumptions that we're making and we haven't actually asked students what their reasons for behaving in certain ways are.

Of course, we have to be careful when we ask students, particularly, not to ask a few students to speak on behalf of all students. And that's especially the case for minoritized students. When that happens a lot, minoritized students are asked to speak on behalf of all the members of a particular racial demographic.

And so we have to be careful not to put students in that position. Also we have to be very mindful of who holds the power when we are having these conversations. Traditionally, faculty, and administrators hold a lot of the power, and that may leave students feeling uncomfortable in sharing their insights for fear of unknown repercussions.

And so one way to counter that and to rebalance that power is to provide students with at least one avenue to provide feedback anonymously. So if they're feeling like they may not want to share something, they still have a safe way to do that.

Other things to consider, of course, are student listening sessions that are led by grad students or having someone outside the Department, perhaps maybe someone who is a specialist, a DEI specialist, or student support person to help with those getting the feedback from students.

And then, of course, faculty are critical in this process. Faculty have their own experiences teaching gateway courses. They have expertise in their course subject matter. And also their relationships with students are critical in understanding what the roadblocks may be for student success.

And so third step, of course, is to build that plan, establish a task force to develop the plan for departmental equity. We can't just stop with gathering the data and interpreting the data.

And so to do that, first, it's important to set equity goals and define how you're going to measure progress. You want to do this in community and with this task force. And ideally, you'd like to build this plan and these measurable goals in ways that bring faculty and students together as co-creators.

If you have questions about what those goals might look like or what types of things you might want to include in that plan, I would recommend that you review part 2 of the actual resource that I'm talking about today, which is entitled teaching practices for educational Equity. And it really outlines some of those evidence-based strategies that you can adopt specifically for teaching and learning.

And then of course, the final piece in all of this, the anchor to all of this is providing ongoing and training and support for faculty. Once you start to identify what some of those problem areas are and what some of those roadblocks that are coming up.

And as you continue to build plans and metrics to overcome some of those roadblocks and you build together-- you build this equity action plan, faculty need support to actually enact on that. One of the pitfalls of equity work is kind of assuming that anyone can do it and that it's work that's easy to do because it's not, it' very difficult.

And we also know that faculty are-- and instructors are stretched thin. And we've heard that so much. And so as much support as we can provide is absolutely critical. This is a huge task. I've given you just a rough outline of some of the things you can start thinking about, but we also know that this is the type of work that really requires a lot of hand-holding.

And so our network has developed a workbook and it's called Improving Departmental Equity Using the Impact Framework. The Impact Framework, again, is something that was designed by Dr. Jeremiah Simms.

And this is a workbook that includes step-by-step instructions and worksheets for folks who are more expert in this and for those who are just getting their feet wet to help

them to anticipate and acknowledge and redress some of that racism that is perpetuated by academic department policies and practices once they've been identified.

And so I share this with you as a resource along the way. And just briefly, I wanted to just share this impact framework because I think it highlights the shift in thinking that we have to move towards as we continue to really transform departments.

Dr. Jeremiah Simms defines equity in this way. He says it's innovative, meaning it moves us away from oppressive practices. He says it's mindful, in that it accounts for the whole intersectional student experience.

He says it's purposeful, in that it intentionally challenges our national Eurocentric status quo. He says it's actionable-- it calls out and challenges deeply entrenched anti-blackness and other forms of racism.

He says that it's caring-- it's predicated on holistic care and concern for students' real lives in and outside of school. And then lastly, it's transformative-- it radically reimagines education and student support. So this is the type of change that we are working towards, particularly when it comes to departmental equity.

And so with that, I invite you to continue to connect with our network, continue to stay within this track and learn more about our network and all the work that we're doing. Certainly, subscribe to our newsletter. Follow us on Twitter. Check us out on LinkedIn. We always have a variety of resources to share and support you along the journey.

NORMA HOLLEBEKE: Thank you so much, Jessica. This is wonderful. We're going to go ahead and tackle some questions. I see that we've got a few questions in our Q&A. You mentioned that it's a complex task to tackle equity within your department.

What do you do in the case that you have a department that's on a shoestring budget? Because it can also be expensive. Where would you start in terms of giving advice to a department chair or dean that has that tight budget but really needs to get started on this?

JESSICA ROWLAND WILLIAMS: Yeah, great question. A couple of pieces of advice. First would be one of the things that we can be really bad about in higher education is working in silos. And that happens a lot in academic departments. Everyone's just so focused on the work that they're doing, and the innovation is happening in pockets, but it's not being shared.

And so I think one of the things I would start with is to reach across the departments. This is an excellent time for collaboration. This is an excellent time for working together and really just making that collaboration count.

So the first thing I would tap into is, what other departments have done? What's working well? What things have they tried? What hasn't worked? And so when you're finding and thinking about how to target those limited resources, you're not reinventing the wheel if there are already things that have been learned or that other folks have already tried, you don't have to start from scratch.

I think the other thing that I would encourage departments to do is it's to find ways to start tapping into some of those federal funds. Hopefully someone from my team can put a link in the chat.

We actually have an entire web page where we've shared a number of resources outlining some of the federal dollars that are available for institutions now who are interested in building their digital learning infrastructure or getting some additional funding for training as it relates to digital learning. So definitely check out those resources, listen to those webinars, and start seeing if there are possibilities to tap into some of the federal funding.

NORMA HOLLEBEKE: Great. So on that same concept of complexity, how would you advise leaders of departments or colleges in which not everyone is on the same page in their commitment to equity? Do you have any advice for those leaders?

JESSICA ROWLAND WILLIAMS: Absolutely. This is a problem-- a common pitfall in equity work. I talk about this often. But Dr. Paul Gorski refers to this challenge as pacing for privilege. And when he describes that, what he means is that we often have a tendency to pace our equity work on the folks who are least engaged in the work.

And unfortunately, the folks who are least engaged in the work are usually the ones who have the least investment in there actually being any real change because they hold the most privilege. And so my advice to institutional leaders, to departments is always that you don't actually need everyone on board in order to make change in an organization. You actually need about 30% of folks on board to make real change. And so focus on the folks who are ready to change and ready to move and let them lead the work.

And the folks who-- unfortunately, there's always going to be some folks who just aren't ready for this or they don't want to-- they're just not ready to make that change. And I

think it's OK. I think we can't, however, wait for them or allow them
to set the pace of the work and the change that needs to happen in going forward.

NORMA HOLLEBEKE: Wonderful I think we have time for one last question. So this comes in asking specifically about student learning outcomes, which are often required by accrediting agencies. And in some programs, such as this participants program and school, they have national certification exams.

So they have to be able to educate all their students and have those students successfully pass that national exam. How would a digital equity audit or a departmental equity audit impact or apply to them?

JESSICA ROWLAND WILLIAMS: Let me just make sure I'm understanding the question. because I see those things working in parallel. You can certainly do an equity audit while also doing the work that's needed for the accreditation review.

I think, honestly, the audit takes the information that you would likely be gathering from that and just kind of takes it a step further. And so making sure that you disaggregate the data, particularly by race and also first generation status, health eligibility, et cetera. But also not just stopping with gathering the information, like we mentioned, but really working to interpret that information in community with students and faculty so that you can build a narrative around what's happening at your institution that's informed by lived experiences of students and faculty of different races and socioeconomic statuses across the board.

So I think our asking is to-- what we're recommending is to almost build a little bit more color around what's normally gathered as just o quantitative data, which don't, as I mentioned, usually tell the full story of what's happening in a department.

NORMA HOLLEBEKE: Right on. Very spot on. So thank you, Dr. Williams, for showing us how to stay accountable to those equity goals. And thank you to everyone who joined us in this session. We hope that you can stick around for our final session.