

September 17, 2014

President Greg Gillespie  
Ventura College

Dear President Gillespie:

As our one-year partnership comes to an end, we wanted to provide a summary of the work completed. Since the project commenced in August, 2013, Ventura College (VC) faculty, staff and administrators, together with the Center for Urban Education (CUE), have created a foundation on which the college can undertake the necessary next steps to achieve equitable educational outcomes for its racially and ethnically diverse student population. As a key part of the first year of VC's Title V grant, *Velocidad*, CUE assisted VC in better understanding how its students, particularly students of color, may experience the institution. To that end, CUE:

- Examined a series of websites and documents that often serve as students' first interaction with the college. For example, using our web scan protocol, we studied the functionality and messaging of web pages devoted to online orientation, transfer and career centers, and financial aid, from the perspective of racial and ethnic minority students.
- Reviewed twenty Math V03 (Intermediate Algebra) course syllabi. As one of the barrier courses identified in *Velocidad*, we positioned our inquiry into Math V03 as a model that can be implemented across the other barrier courses. Given that teaching is typically a private enterprise, we used the syllabus as an entry point to understanding the learning environment in this course.

Findings from these two inquiries were shared with VC's faculty, staff, and administrative leaders at an all-day meeting on March 14, 2014. We provided copies of the reports, which we understand were shared with the appropriate personnel on campus.

Since the spring, CUE has investigated the program review reports of three departments (biological sciences, psychology, and criminal justice), paying close attention to their incorporation of equity principles and how these documents can be used as a tool to foster institutional improvement for equity.

These reports and the rich findings contained within them offer valuable insight into VC's existing efforts to support the success of its racially and ethnically diverse student population, as well as



areas where such efforts can be improved. We hope they will serve as a productive starting point for future work.

With that said, we have over the course of the past year noticed several issues that may need to be addressed if the reports are going to have a broader institutional impact, if the goals of *Velocidad* are going to be fulfilled, and if VC is going to achieve equity for its students. We offer the following observations with the intention of helping VC create the conditions necessary to realize the promise of the past year's efforts. Accompanying these observations are recommendations that can be used to address the potential underlying issues.

- 1. Faculty who teach the twenty high-risk barrier courses may feel blamed or “under the microscope” for the unsuccessful grades of their students, many of whom are Latino/a.** As we observed with the Math V03 faculty, setting equity goals and probing into the state of teaching and learning in the potentially high-risk environment of low-success courses can create tension and mistrust. Going forward, it is important to support all faculty who teach barrier courses, and crucially, to provide a safe space in which they can inquire into the nature of the inequities apparent in the student outcomes data. A productive first step may be to (a) understand their experience of teaching these courses; (b) get from their perspective the reasons why these courses are a barrier for students; and (c) solicit their ideas for how these courses can be improved.

Recommendations:

- a. *Hold a retreat for faculty who teach barrier courses.* The purpose of the retreat would be to provide these faculty with a safe space in which they can discuss, across departmental lines, the particular issues they are facing and what can be done to address them. Ideally, the retreat would be facilitated by a third-party who has no connection to VC, but nonetheless understands the community college landscape in California. The retreat may also feature a “talk-back” session to the chairs of the departments with barrier courses, as well as the appropriate deans.
- b. *Develop opportunities for professional development.* Based on what the faculty share, the deans and department chairs (or whomever the appropriate personnel is) should create a series of opportunities that would enable faculty to develop the needed knowledge, skills, and capacities to better support their students in general and Latino/a students in particular. These may include workshops on culturally responsive or inclusive pedagogy. For math, VC may want to consider consulting with Professor Danny Martin (University of Illinois at Chicago), a former community college instructor, who conducts research on issues of race in mathematics pedagogy, or Professor Uri Treisman (University of Texas at Austin), who is a product of California community colleges and is known for his work on improving student pathways through developmental math. We also recommend James Gray, math chair at the Community College of Aurora in Colorado.

- c. *Encourage faculty participation in professional development opportunities.* Once these opportunities have been created, the deans and department chairs should urge their faculty to participate and attend.
- 2. Being an HSI may be a point of tension on campus.** At our first meeting in September, 2013, participants shared concerns over whether being an HSI requires VC to focus efforts specifically on Latino/a students or on all students more generally. As VC proceeds with *Velocidad*, it is important to resolve this conflict so that all VC students are receiving the support and guidance they require.

Recommendations:

- a. *Determine what makes VC a Hispanic-serving institution.* Since HSIs typically emerge in response to changes in student demographics rather than through intentional choices made by an institution, understanding how and why VC became an HSI, as well as how it enacts this piece of its identity (i.e. in terms of its mission, policies, and practices) are key. Conducting an audit of policies and practices is a first step, which can be followed by a campus-wide survey to gauge how various constituents (e.g. faculty, leadership, staff, students) understand what it means to be an HSI.
  - b. *Conduct a campus inventory of student services.* The purpose of this inventory is to have a snapshot of services that VC currently provides its students in general and its Latino/a students in particular. The inventory should capture whether services are specific to particular student groups or open to all students, as well as how they are staffed and funded. Based on the findings, VC can determine whether additional services are needed or existing services need to be reconfigured so that all students have access to an appropriate level of support.
  - c. *Conduct focus groups with different student groups (e.g. Latino/a, African American, Asian, White students).* The purpose of these focus groups is to better understand the extent to which students feel supported at VC, by which offices / departments, and by which individuals. Findings from the focus group can be combined with the inventory to determine how particular services or practices can be enhanced or modified.
- 3. Equity is understood differently across campus constituents.** Also at our first meeting in September, 2013, participants shared that equity is defined as equal outcomes by some and equality or fairness by others. At CUE, we advocate for an understanding of equity as fairness, caring, and transformation. Additionally, we define equity in outcomes as the attainment of parity (e.g., based on each group's proportional representation) in retention, completion, and excellence (e.g., transfer to highly selective colleges). This focus on clear and measurable outputs is a necessary condition to eliminating gaps across students from different racial and ethnic groups.

Recommendations:

- a. *Conduct a campus-wide survey to determine how equity is understood.* The purpose of this survey is to determine whether there is indeed a divided understanding of equity at VC.
  - b. *Hold forums to discuss survey results and their implications.* Should such a divide exist, VC's senior leadership should sponsor forums or town hall meetings in which various campus constituents would be invited to share their thoughts on equity and what it would take for VC to become an equitable institution. A second purpose of these events is to help seed the message of how equity is a shared responsibility that requires the efforts of faculty, staff, administrators, and leadership going "above and beyond" to ensure that students are passing courses, progressing, and completing at equal rates.
  - c. *Commission a "state of equity" report.* The purpose of this report is to document how VC is doing in terms of achieving equity across a variety of outcomes. To start, this report could capture VC's progress towards equity in terms of the five outcomes identified in its Student Equity Plan. In addition to reporting on student outcomes, this report should also identify and describe which departments and offices (academic and otherwise) that have made explicit commitments to achieving equity, as well as how they have enacted their commitment. Finally, this report can also outline the state of equity in areas such as hiring (i.e. for full-time and part-time instructional faculty, counseling faculty, staff, leadership).
- 4. Leadership for equity.** This final observation is offered not because we noted a lack of leadership for equity, but because we want to emphasize how important this aspect is for all of the other issues and recommendations discussed already. We do not confine our meaning of leadership to those at the most senior levels of the institution, but include also academic department chairs, student affairs directors, and administrative heads. In addition, we include individuals who may not hold a formal position of leadership, but who are admired and recognized on campus for their efforts to promote equity. These individuals are called "change agents."

Recommendations:

- a. *Conduct workshops on leadership development for equity.* While some campus leaders may already know and understand what is involved in making VC an equitable institution, others may require or desire additional guidance on how to enact equity in their daily work. Workshops could cover areas such as: (a) using data disaggregated by race and ethnicity to inform decision making, as well as establish and benchmark equity goals; (b) conducting inquiry to better understand why inequities exist and persist over time; (c) establishing equity-minded norms in everyday practice; (d) developing assessments for equity; and (e) embedding equity in program review.

- b. *Host annual retreats for VC campus equity leaders.* The purpose of these yearly retreats is to provide VC's equity leaders with dedicated time to discuss the state of equity on campus and to determine needed next steps to maintain a focus on equity.
- c. *Emphasize equity in all public communications.* Campus leaders have immense power to signal the importance of equity for the institution. In speeches, emails, web pages and the like, leaders should take all opportunities to encourage campus members to consider how they are responsible for equity and what they can do to contribute to their students' success.

Thank you for giving us an opportunity to work with you and your campus to better understand how racially and ethnically diverse student populations can be better served.

Sincerely,



Estela Mara Bensimon  
Professor & Co-Director  
Center for Urban Education  
Rossier School of Education  
University of Southern California