Joint Q&A: Equity in Program Transformation, Susan Elrod and Marilyn Strutchens

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Marilyn Strutchens: One of the things Susan mentioned during her talk was the Pell-eligible underrepresented groups not graduating at the same rates as others, and so I asked her, "What are things that they are doing to find out what's happening with these students? Is it a systematic thing? Is it across the teachers that they're encountering or is it something that they believe about themselves? What factors are causing the Pell-eligible students not to graduate?"

Susan Elrod: And I said, "Marilyn, that's a great question; we don't quite know yet." We are just coming to grips with the data, and I was just explaining that when we look over time, rates for these students, underrepresented minority or not, have been flat. There has been no change up or down for over 10 years. So, this is a persistent problem, and what we don't know is why these students may be dropping out more often than others. Now we have to go back into the data, there are first-generation students in there, there are underrepresented students, there are majority students; we need to look deeper. Consequently, at the same time, the institution has established an emergency fund to help students with short-term financial issues. They're starting up like wildfire across the country. And, we now have a food pantry on campus. We are also starting a program for children who come through the foster system. It turns out this may be an invisible population of students on your campus. There's no real way to identify them, but what do children who come through foster youth not have? The kind of support that comes from a family. When they age out of the system, they may become homeless at times, like over the winter break. So now we have a fund that our alumni and others can donate to, to pay for the housing of students over winter break. These are just some of the issues that we're starting to address and will be addressing more because of our interrogation of the data. Now that we are aware of it, we cannot *not* address the issue.

Strutchens: At the end you talked about shared leadership. How do you see that relating to the networked improvement communities?

Elrod: That's a great question. I would ask, "Who is involved in the RACs?" What kinds of people—are there deans, are there department chairs, is there a provost somehow involved? I know it's hard sometimes to get your provost to get involved because they have so many commitments. Whoever is in the RAC is great, but you might think about how to expand in different ways and to engage a variety of others. Another group that I think is important to think about are the people in your Student Affairs division. They are doing things that impact your students that you may not be aware of, and they may be doing something that overlaps or is working at odds with what you are trying to accomplish. More than likely, they could be your new best friend and collaborator. If you looked at the histories of how university budgets have changed over time, one of the biggest growth areas is the Student Affairs operation; it has grown in terms of resources invested to address the issues that we know we face with students. So, there are resources there to consider! But, I would say to think broadly about whom you are engaging; maybe the RAC has a particular group of people involved. Think about peripheral engagements with others or who you can tell about your project so that they might get engaged in it or connect you to someone else who might. You might be surprised at how many people might be interested in what you're trying to do. Even though your work is

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about math teacher preparation, there could be all kinds of common bonds and synergies that you might discover by reaching out beyond your typical circle of people.

I wanted to go to Marilyn's last slide that showed all kinds of systemic change projects. How might you think about that work in the context of the River Model; is there anything in there that you could connect back into the model? For example, one question I had was, "What might be a vision?" I mean I actually see several visions all around that slide, such as more well-prepared students entering teacher preparation programs, so we'd have more well-prepared teachers. That one stuck out to me. There is a PR^2 abbreviated intervention listed there too. What is that intervention and what is the data connected to it; how are you going to know it will work?

Strutchens: I think looking at our cycle, we all began with the MTE-Partnership Guiding Principles and that kind of helped us all to have a vision about what we wanted the goals in our secondary mathematics teachers to be and so when we created our RACs, we made it into that vision. PR^2 used to be the MATH RAC. It's now Program Recruitment and Retention. A part of PR^2 can relate to some of the work that you just talked about in terms of, "What are some reasons why students are falling out of programs; how can we change programs so that they meet the needs of more students so that more students stay in? The Actively Learning Mathematics RAC focuses on the first two years of college in terms of changing the way that college mathematics is taught so that more students can make sense of it and really engage in it and be able to apply it to their situation. It's not only helping secondary math teachers but also teaches students in other fields. We have this vision about what we want our standard of secondary mathematics teachers to look like and so within our RACs we're working toward that vision.

Elrod: What kind of data are you looking at? How are the RACs going to know they're successful at it and making sure this is happening?

Strutchens: We have two working groups that are forming into RACs. They're going to help pull all of this together. Right now, I think all of us have our individual RACs, and we have our driver diagrams and our goals of what we're trying to reach individually as RACs, and our vision of our goal is standard as a network recruitment community. But the working groups like the Transformations Working Group comes together to help people to think about how involvement in multiple RACs can really transform the programs so that we could reach the gold standard that we use.

A question from the crowd: "I wonder if we do enough to consider how we bring districts that represent radically different equity profiles in dialogue with each other through partnerships so it can work across the school districts."

Strutchens: Often within our professional development with teachers, we work across districts because we work in an area where there are a lot of small districts. Bringing teachers together from different districts and having these kinds of conversations using catalyzing change is a way of getting teachers to think about those issues (and also administrators). Using different vignettes to talk about students' experiences can really help teachers to think about these issues at a different level, such as showing them the video of Mauri, showing them a video of other students who talk about their experiences in schools, showing them the voices of students who have gone through school systems and why things must change.

Robert Berry has some case studies of African American boys, Katherine Chval has different case studies of gifted students, we can find a lot of different case studies that we can use with teachers to help them really think about students and their experiences. The National Council of Supervisors in Mathematics also brings together people from a lot of different districts at their meeting and uses them. People express themselves by getting upset about

or in disdain about things that are happening in their districts and the need to change policies because often it is the policies that are really holding students and teachers back. So, how do you change the policies, how do we talk to administrators, how do you talk to not just district leaders but also state departments?

Audience question: "How do you handle the positional leader who doesn't engage in the work?"

Elrod: Unfortunately, that is an all too common scenario. As I mentioned before, I think a more shared leadership model is much more effective. When I think about a shared leadership model, I realize that it requires everybody to be on board with that model, including the administrators. I would say to the faculty in the room who are working diligently and can't get the attention or engagement of positional leaders, the best way to work around that reality is to form alliances and to build up a critical mass of faculty leaders. It's much more difficult, it takes longer, and it is harder because you may not have access to the resources you need, so it is not optimal. Think about your sphere of influence or beyond, talk about what you are doing with others, and you might be able to find an ally in an unexpected place like in Student Affairs. If you can't get the dean on board, maybe you can get the Vice President for Student Affairs on board or think about a chair of another department who might have similar concerns or goals. Think about the alliances that you can create in your sphere of influence and find the people who are with you and then go from there; again, it's harder, it takes longer, and you may not get what you need to get done as quickly. You may also have change course to accommodate the environment, which is not something that we're often willing to do, but it is something you may have to think about doing. So, be patient and flexible. Hopefully, that's helpful.

Audience question: "How do we create a system that does not just give someone bread crumbs but emancipates people from colonialism?"

Strutchens: I think it takes more than a few people talking about equity issues in order to change systems. I was involved in a strategic planning committee for the state department in Alabama and the major people who were talking about equity issues were African Americans and then Basil was on the strategic committee (and he's one of our students so definitely he was talking about equity issues) because he cares, and so it takes more than people of African American decent fighting battles for African American students. It takes more than just women fighting for gender issues in order to make things change; it takes all of us fighting for these issues for change together. Gary wanted me to put up a slide about my acronym for WOKE and it's: W for wondering when things are going to change so that we can really see a difference, O for it's an ongoing mission of mine to change things, K for keeping fighting no matter what situation I'm in, and then E for equity because it is always on my mind.
So, stay WOKE, because people throw that word around. But what does that mean, "Are you woke?" We were talking about in our Clinical Experiences RAC that we can't just talk about the issues that are close to our hearts, we have to think about the issues that are facing each and every student in our classroom. In order for things to change, in order for us to emancipate people, we have to come together, we have to be voices. We can't expect just the people who do research on equity to change things; it has to be all of us working together to change things. When we look at the data from the first discussions about "broadening participation," we've been talking about these numbers for years, there were a lot of gaps in terms of student achievement and it's not just based on students' abilities, it's based on what they have the opportunity to learn. So, how do we as a people, how do we as Americans, how do we change what's happening to our students on a day-to-day basis and just be people who study equity issues who help make the changes happen. It has to be people who care in general about education.

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Audience question: Someone asked about persistence, the importance of persistence and in trying to keep the vision alive.

Elrod: Right. Staying WOKE. I think to me it goes back to the "it takes a village" concept. I see too often a single passionate champion who just burns out because they are the only one. How many of you in this room, don't raise your hands … I think in order to keep the momentum going, to stay persistent even in the ways that Marilyn was talking about, you have to enlist other colleagues and get people working with you. I think that's especially important because somebody may move on to be department chair, somebody may go on sabbatical, somebody may take a leave of absence, or take another job; there's always change and so the way you can buffer yourselves against change is to make sure you have enough of an army of people with you. One of the challenges I think we all face is: How do we build the army? How do we convince others of our passion? I think it's important for everyone to get outside of yourselves just a little bit and try to learn about what others care about or are interested in and then connect your passion to that. Find common ground to enlist others and then you will hold each other up and form a larger community of people who can really keep the momentum going and, hopefully, for the long run.

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