
A Guide to Centering Equity in Collaborative Community Work

for Organizations, Agencies and Initiatives that are Service-based and focused on Equitable Outcomes

We begin with a story.

One day, a group of villagers was working by a river. Suddenly, someone noticed a small child floating downstream. They rushed to save the child and cared for it on the shore. Then, the villagers noticed another screaming child in the river, and they pulled that child out. Soon there was a steady stream of children floating downstream and the whole village became involved in the many tasks of rescue work: pulling these poor children out of the stream, ensuring they were properly fed, clothed, and housed, and integrating them into the life of the village. While not all the children could be saved, the villagers felt they were doing well by saving as many as they did. Before long, however, the village became overwhelmed with all of the rescue work and a disagreement emerged about how to proceed with the work of helping the children. While one group argued that every possible hand was needed to save the current flow of children floating in the river, the other group argued that if they found out how those children were getting into the water farther upstream, they could repair the situation more effectively. Some cried, “Don’t you see, if we find out how they’re getting in the river, we can truly make sure the children won’t get into the river to drown. By going upstream, we can address the root of the problem!”

This story describes a problem. In fact, it digs into how, exactly, *we understand a problem*. Versions of this story are often used in the field of public health, especially in terms of what are called the “Social Determinants of Health.” This term refers to features of United States society that, by design and function over time, unequally distribute resources to certain groups of citizens particularly based on race-ethnicity, gender, and social class.



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WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY...?

DIVERSITY

“Diversity” refers to differences across lived experiences, perspectives, and social identities (e.g., race, class, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, etc.)

EQUITY

“Equity” is fairness achieved through systematically addressing the root causes of disparities in opportunities and outcomes, including eliminating policies, practices, and attitudes that perpetuate them. Whereas, “equality” is when all are treated the same and have access to similar resources regardless of need, context, and status.

INCLUSION

“Inclusion” is when all people feel equally included, safe, valued, and empowered in places, processes, groups, and decision-making.

MARGINALIZED

“Marginalized” groups are those that are actively pushed to the margins or edges of power and decision-making in society.

RACISM

“Racism” is different from racial prejudice, hatred, or discrimination. Racism involves one group having the power to carry out systematic discrimination through the institutional policies and practices of the society and by shaping the cultural beliefs and values that support those racist policies and practices ([Dismantling Racism Works](#)).

STRUCTURAL

“Structural” or “upstream” refers to conditions and systems that organize and maintain privileges for some groups while maintaining disadvantages for others.

UPSTREAM

“Upstream” conditions are those that surround and impact all the options, opportunities and conditions “downstream.” We are using it as a synonym for “structural.”

With this focus, one does their work with the assumption that a person’s social group identity (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, etc.) and *the history of how the laws and social customs of the United States have hindered or afforded life opportunities for those within these social groups* impacts their current life choices. These limited choices can include where to live, where to attend school, what types of food to feed a family, and the types of jobs that are accessible. In the context of public health, for example, this understanding assumes that these social conditions ultimately determine the physical and mental health of people, so an approach to treating common health problems over the longterm means addressing these social conditions head-on.

How does the River Story relate to our own community work?

A very important part of seeing equity as a verb, and centering it in our work, is to constantly reflect on how our own positions in society relate to the “upstream” forces. Having your team read a blog post or article from those listed at the end of this guide would be a good way to focus discussion.

Use the following questions to reflect together on how the reading and the River Story relate to your collective community work:

1. Think about The River Story. How does this illustrate common approaches to community problems?
 - a. Which community efforts represent “downstream” approaches?
 - b. Which social factors are at the source of the river impacting students?
2. What is your team’s shared understanding of structural inequality? What role do “structures” play in our everyday lives?
3. Within your team, consider the privileges, advantages and disadvantages that result from structural inequality.
 - a. What are racial advantages that have come from structural inequality? What are racial disadvantages that have resulted from structural inequality?
 - b. What are gendered advantages that have come from structural inequality? What are gendered disadvantages that have resulted from structural inequality?
4. Does the fundamental impact of structural inequality on your community ring true for you? Why or why not? What alternative understandings may you be grappling with?



THE ALL SEEING EYE, LOS ANGELES | PHOTO BY MATILDA BABAIEVA ON UNSPLASH

How do we center equity in our community work?

For community efforts with a goal of equitable opportunity and outcomes to reach that goal, equity must be embedded all throughout. Again, equity must be part at the center of the “doing,” not seen as an add-on or distraction. Lessons learned from successful community efforts and the research listed at the end of this guide provide broad and deep evidence of the need to center equity. For example, a 2018 report by the Aspen Institute Forum for Community Solutions tells us, “Strategies to achieve equity must target the unequal needs and conditions of people and communities created by structural and institutional inequity” (p.3; see also, Kania & Kramer, 2015). The Aspen Report further urges collective impact and other collaborative efforts to recognize that such communities operate within a context of structural inequity that makes obtaining equitable outcomes unlikely unless these issues are directly and explicitly confronted (Miles and Nemoj, 2018).

In other words, if you want to meet your goal of equitable

access to opportunities and outcomes, you must actively apply an equity lens to every part of what you do. This means equity not only is embedded into programming, but also is intentionally applied to the structure, culture, and operational practices of the organizations involved. In order to be truly effective, this equity work should include all stakeholder groups - program staff, community members, administrators, boards, and funders.

The following are examples of strategies for applying equity to *culture, structures, practices, and services*:

- Conduct a systematic review in which stakeholders critically examine whether organizational practices are maintaining or disrupting prevailing power dynamics that may perpetuate racial and other forms of inequity and injustice
- Develop common language of terms that also describes how themes such as equity, power, and privilege interact with your work
- Explicitly address issues of social and economic injustice and structural racism in the initiative’s vision, mission, and strategies

- Embed targeted recruitment and hiring efforts to diversify staff, partners, and funders to better reflect the demographics and/or lived experiences of those the initiative serves
- Evaluate candidates for employment in part based on their equity competency
- Provide continuous training around implicit bias and white privilege
- Provide training and support around providing culturally responsive programming in order to help standardize practices across an initiative
- Use disaggregated data by race, gender, class, and other characteristics to better document and track disparities
- Conduct a structural analysis of data to help identify systemic or root causes
- Structure evaluation findings and monitoring reports in a way that illustrates the connection between disparities and systemic causes in order to avoid stereotypes and inaccurate conclusions
- Connect with statewide or national efforts that are working toward advancing social justice and policy change
- Identify ways that the initiative can support and amplify the work of local agencies and organizations already engaged in explicit equity work

There is no standard approach to centering equity into collaborative community work. The strategies ultimately used to incorporate an equity lens in a community initiative will depend on where the partners, community, staff, and leadership may be in their understanding of structural equity issues. Although partners may have engaged in equity work in their own organizations, collaborative efforts must also engage in the work together. Doing so will enable a shared understanding and approach toward equity, as it specifically relates to your particular community initiative.

The process of purposefully embedding equity into an initiative or organization will be ongoing and iterative - again, equity is a verb. This kind of deep equity work that digs into biases will question the privilege and power of some individuals and institutions. It often is important to seek out experts experienced in coaching organizations on embedding equity into practices, cultures, and structures.

What does program evaluation have to do with centering equity?

Program evaluation, especially when using culturally responsive or empowerment frameworks, can help amplify voices of marginalized groups, highlight systems and structures that perpetuate inequities, and help groups keep themselves accountable to equity goals in targeted ways. Ask one another how your group plans to systematically reflect on (i.e., evaluate) both the implementation process and progress towards outcomes. See the list of resources below for places to look for help.

National Organizations

- [National Equity Project](#)
- [Race Matters Institute](#)
- [Step Up: Equity Matters](#)
- [Strive Together](#)
- [Center for Culturally Responsive Evaluation and Assessment](#)

Organizations Local to Madison, Wisconsin

- [Integrated Comprehensive Systems for Equity](#)
- [Mindfulness for the People LLC](#)
- [Race to Equity](#)
- [Ubuntu Research & Evaluation LLC](#)
- [YWCA Madison](#)

Online Toolkits or Resource Hubs

- [Collective Impact Forum](#)
- [Dismantling Racism Works](#)
- [Practical Strategies for Culturally Competent Evaluation from the CDC](#)
- [Community Tool Box - Enhancing Cultural Competence](#)
- [Living Cities Racial Equity Tools](#)
- [Racial Equity Toolkit: An Opportunity to Operationalize Equity](#)
- [Race Forward](#)
- [W.K. Kellogg Foundation - Racial Equity Resource Guide](#)

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