

Examining the field of institutional research: Toward more equitable practices

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Abstract

As improving equity becomes prioritized in higher education, Offices of Institutional Research (OIRs) find themselves in a central position to identify and address educational inequities faced by racially minoritized students. However, their potential to serve as a catalyst for organizational change has yet to be fulfilled. In this study, we present a critical discourse analysis of mission statements to understand how these OIRs describe their function and purpose in the California Community Colleges system. Results are based on 108 reviewed statements. These results reveal a limited discourse around race and equity. None of the statements in our sample included the word race or any words stemming from it such as racism or racial disparity. The majority (86%) of statements omitted equity from their purpose, failing to describe how OIRs can serve to improve equitable outcomes in community college. Our work prompts the field to reimagine their role within the community college they serve by becoming race-conscious and equity-minded in the ways they articulate their role and function as major hubs of institutional data.

INTRODUCTION

Offices of Institutional Research¹ (OIR) are critical to the function of higher education, particularly community colleges. They serve as a central hub for collecting, analyzing, and reporting data related to student outcomes and institutional effectiveness. In recent years, scholars have called for IR to respond to concerns for student equity. This call urges OIRs and personnel within them to move beyond their roles of stewards of data to become proactive stakeholders in identifying and addressing educational inequities afflicting racially minoritized students at their home campus (Hernández et al., 2018). This expanded role in advancing equity is critical as policymakers have invested in new reforms (i.e., restructuring developmental education) and initiatives (i.e., closing equity gaps) to

improve student success, enhance equity, and become more justice-oriented institutions. As these policies are implemented, OIRs are key to helping community colleges to identify baseline conditions and areas of need to close student equity gaps (McArthur, 2016). To this end, we surveyed the existing 116 OIRs within California's Community College system. In doing so, we used critical discourse analysis to examine how IR offices articulate their purpose and role in advancing educational equity for racially minoritized communities. Our study responds to the following research questions:

1. In what ways do OIRs describe their role and function within community college?
2. How, if at all, do OIRs articulate their role in addressing or advancing (racial) equity?

In answering these research questions, we explore the racial discourse embedded and omitted, from official statements espousing the purpose and mission of institutional research within the California Community Colleges. We argue that OIRs are a critical department in community college to advance racial equity goals, but their articulated purpose and traditional functions minimize their role in being active participants in identifying and dismantling inequities on campus. The results provide a deeper understanding of the function and role of OIRs and what they seek to achieve as organizational units embedded in community colleges.

LITERATURE REVIEW: HISTORY, ROLE, AND POSSIBILITY OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

Offices of Institutional Research are equipped to advance efforts that seek to address educational inequities for racially minoritized students in higher education (Hernández et al., 2018; McArthur, 2016). Assessing the function of IR, Terenzini (1993) notes that these academic departments are key to strategic planning as they provide empirical data on institutional effectiveness for decision-makers to consider. In Terenzini's view, OIRs provide "evidence of weaknesses or flaws which interfere with the attainment of the [institution's] purpose" (pg. 2). Building on the role of OIR, Baxter (2020) asserts that IR offices execute a wide-ranging set of tasks in support of the decision-making processes of various stakeholders within higher education institutions. Baxter describes these offices as pivotal in "collecting, analyzing, and reporting data relevant to students, faculty, and staff as well as reporting to the state and federal government, accreditors, and other external bodies" (Baxter, 2020, p. 2). While we agree with the value of OIRs described by Baxter and Terenzini, scholarship focusing on the role of IR within the context of community college is scant (Hernández et al., 2018; McArthur, 2016). Our study seeks to address this gap in the literature by examining the discourse within the missions, purpose, and values of OIRs and how they articulate a role in addressing educational inequity.

History and development of institutional research

Institutional research derives from early multistate and national surveys collected by the Association of Institutional Research (Knight et al., 1997; Peterson, 1985; Volkwein et al., 2008) seeking to support and grow a field of professionals that "leverage data to make decisions and take actions that benefit students" (Association of Institutional Research [AIR], 2020). The two most notable early definitions of institutional research include Joe Saupe's (1990) idea of *decision support* and Cameron Fincher's (1978) *organizational intelligence*. Both of these notions focused on describing an academic unit within colleges

and universities that collected and provided data to help leaders make informed decisions. Over time, institutional research has grown to be a key formal academic unit within higher education. In 2016, the National Survey of Institutional Research Offices reported its findings with more than 1100 OIRs surveyed across the country. The surveyed offices agreed that among their three core functions included: institutional reporting, strategic planning, and outcomes assessment. Volkwein et al. (2008) note that increased accountability from policymakers and accreditation agencies has fueled the creation of IR offices as well as the growth of IR professionals. Since the mid-1970s, the number of IR offices has tripled and membership to AIR has grown from less than 1000 to over 4000 professionals (Swing et al., 2016). At the same time, IR offices have expanded their role and capacity to support senior leaders, academic affairs, business affairs, student affairs, information systems, and alumni/fundraising development.

The possibilities of institutional research in community colleges

Driven by institutional reporting, strategic planning, and outcomes assessment, within community colleges, IR offices can help illuminate areas of need for racially minoritized communities in higher education. Community colleges serve a broad spectrum of diverse students, ranging from English language learners, dual enrollment students, recent high school graduates, job seekers looking to enhance skills, and adult re-entry students. In addition to these types of students, research has documented how race, class, and gender also shapes who enrolls in community college and the levels of success experienced (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012; Locks, 2016). This diversity in student enrollment within community colleges heightens the need for OIRs to collect and report data that help to assess effectiveness and identify educational disparities. As noted by the Research and Planning Group (2021), OIRs are in a prime position to use data and evidence to transform their institutions, make data accessible for all stakeholders, and improve outcomes for all students.

Despite this prime position, OIRs face their own set of challenges within the community college system. Positioned on the lower end of the higher education strata, (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013), community colleges, as a higher education sector, receive less money per student compared to public and private four-year institutions. At the same time, they serve a high concentration of low-income and racially-minoritized students who have faced constant disadvantage and inequality throughout their educational trajectory. Persistent underfunding of community colleges (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2014) means that institutional research offices face the challenge of being understaffed and under-resourced while serving the important role of identifying, understanding, and addressing disparities in institutional outcomes (Morest et al. 2006). This lowered capacity limits the ability of OIRs to meet institutional demands and support student success strategies. Glover (2009) notes that complying with state and federal reporting requires a high degree of time and restricts the capacity of OIRs to help in broader campus change efforts. Despite funding limitations, staffing capacity, and competing priorities, OIRs continue to support institutional priorities such as strategic planning (Falqueto et al., 2019), meeting accreditation requirements (Turk & Taylor, 2019), and collaborating to create a culture of evidence and student success (Swing & Ross, 2016).

Toward an equity-oriented institutional research

Although the role and function of institutional research have been examined since the 1980s (Peterson, 1985; Volkwein, 1990), the focus has been heavily on tracing their evolving

purpose (i.e., data collection, institutional planning, evidence-based decision making), use of technology (i.e., survey design, data analytics, predictive modeling), and structure (i.e., staff capacity, reporting lines, administrative responsibilities). The role of OIRs continues to develop and grow into a central academic unit that fosters collaboration across divisions and departments to not only improve institutional effectiveness but serve students more equitably. Equity is a pivotal practice that not only helps foster critical inquiry toward systems and practices that foster inequities, but can also help steer organizational change toward amplifying the experiences of disproportionately impacted and racially minoritized students. One of the main critiques of OIRs, however, is their focus on objectivity and simply reporting data without contributing efforts toward ameliorating or dismantling the inequities identified (Franco & Hernández, 2018). For example, Abrica and Rivas (2017) highlight how OIRs tend to operate in color-evasive ways (lacking a focus on racial disparities), remaining neutral, and allowing for the data to speak for itself, which tends to reinforce structural inequities on campus. Following this line of research, we seek to explore how OIRs can serve as more than data warehouses or sites of statistical analyses to foster student equity in community colleges.

In order for institutions to achieve student success, developing a culture of evidence is imperative. OIRs are stewards of data, but as an organizational unit they have the opportunity to leverage data collection to understand if marginalized groups are included as full participants on campus (Hernández et al., 2018). The integral role these offices have in higher education offer an opportunity to diminish silos across institutions and bring forth the opportunities for working “synergistically across campus divisions” to benefit the institution and their students (Jankowski & Marshall, 2017, p. 154). Gagliardi (2018) describes a culture of evidence as “the use of data to identify barriers to student success, implement new policies and practices to eliminate those barriers, and evaluate the effectiveness of those interventions” (p. 14). Gagliardi’s culture of evidence requires a need to adopt equity-minded and race-conscious elements within institutional research (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012; Felix et al., 2015). These elements include: standardizing the practice of disaggregating data by gender, race, and ethnicity, conducting additional inquiry to understand the root-causes of inequity, and recognizing that addressing educational disparities requires an ongoing assessment to reflect how institutionalized structures and practices contribute to the reproduction of student inequities (Bensimon, 2018; Dowd et al., 2018). As OIRs roles and responsibilities continue to evolve in higher education, they have the opportunity to play a more active role in identifying and addressing racial inequity.

METHODOLOGY

We use critical race discourse analysis (CRDA), as both a guiding theoretical framework and methodology (Briscoe & Muhammad, 2015; Carter et al., 2019). As a framework, CRDA is used to examine the (in)visible discourse of race and racism in educational texts and policies, such as school discipline policies (Gregory et al., 2010; van Dijk, 2001) and diversity statements (Brown & Klein, 2020; Hypolite & Stewart, 2019; Iverson, 2007). Drawing on critical race theory (Bell, 2004; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016), CRDA centers racialized discourse—for example, language, logic, and ideology—inherent in policies, statements, and texts created by educational institutions. CRDA is not just about analyzing words, but understanding their weight and the impact on communities of color in education, requiring researchers to interrogate discourse and its racial implications. In our study, we use CRDA to explore how, if at all, OIRs mission statements articulate a focus on race, or a need to identify and racial disparities in community college.

As a methodology, CRDA was used to examine the racialized discourse of text and the underlying ideologies that inform what institutional research offices' do in higher education. In recent work, Bimper and Harrison (2015) used a similar approach by combining CRT and discourse analysis to examine how intercollegiate departments espoused a commitment to racial equity and supporting athletes of color. With a focus on mission statements, they analyzed these texts as organizational directives and strategic aims that offered a window into the department's values, purpose, and goals (Bimper & Harrison, p. 3). Similarly, by studying the discourse within official OIR mission statements and department overviews, we get a more comprehensive understanding of the function of these offices, what work they prioritize and value, as well as the role they play, or do not, in advancing racial equity on campus.

Data sources and sampling

We set out to collect data for all campuses in the California Community Colleges. Of the 116 campuses in the system, we collected data for 115 OIRs (See Appendix A). In fall 2020, we began the process of searching through each community college website and identifying the primary webpage for each OIR. As we browsed institutional websites, we captured relevant data such as: link to the webpage, mission statement, official name of the OIR within each community college, OIR leadership information, and number of staff listed. Through this process of data collection, our primary objective was to examine the way in which OIRs articulated their mission or purpose within each community college. To ensure accuracy, multiple team members reviewed the collected data and verified that the appropriate text was captured. As we finalized our data collection process, we identified seven campuses that did not have any publicly available information describing their OIR mission, vision, or priorities. Excluding these seven campuses, our analysis draws from a final sample of 108 campuses; thus, capturing 94% of all OIR mission statements in the California Community Colleges system.

Data analysis and protocol development

Once data was collected, our analysis proceeded in four stages. First, we developed a protocol guided by our theoretical framework that highlighted the racial discourse woven into OIR's mission statements. This approach allowed us to interpret the language and written text as infused with meanings and values (Young & Diem, 2017). In doing so, we examined how, if at all, notions of race and equity language were positioned within the mission and purpose statements guiding OIRs. Specifically, we attempted to uncover the extent to which mission and purpose statements included topics such as race, racial disparities, equity, and how OIRs reframe their role in addressing racial equity in community college. To this end, our protocol captured: institutional characteristics, articulated purpose, description of function, discourse around racial equity, and who benefits from the state purpose. We tested the protocol for several rounds among the team members until a refined version of the tool was appropriate for examining all 108 IR Office mission statements (See Appendix B).

Second, we conducted an independent analysis of sample statements and came together as a team to standardize the review process based on our initial individual reviews. Through this pilot process, we assessed our individual review of each mission statement, discussed similarities and discrepancies, developed a guiding codebook, and helped to

TABLE 1 Categorizing the Role of Institutional Research Offices

Descriptor type	Count	Percentage
Articulated role		
Advancing	21	19%
Collaborative	45	41%
Passive	42	40%
Total	108	100%
Equity-focused		
Equity not mentioned	93	86%
Simply included	5	5%
Equity as a process	4	4%
Equity as a result	6	6%
Total	108	100%
Student-centered		
Yes	52	48%
No	56	52%
Total	108	100%

standardize our analytic approach. Third, each author examined a subset of mission statements using the revised protocol. Drawing on Bimper and Harrison (2015), all authors wrote analytic memos to capture insight on the written statements reviewed, its discursive practice in community college, and the broader socio-cultural implications of these statements in addressing racial equity (Fairclough, 1992). Lastly, to answer our research questions we first aggregated the analysis to categorize and report OIR's framing of their role, function and purpose, and then we employed focused coding to interrogate how phrases like race, racial disparities, and equity were (non)existent from the statements. In what follows, we present our findings of the descriptive statistics on how OIR mission statements described their responsibilities and focus.

FINDINGS

We set out to explore the ways Offices of Institutional Research framed their purpose within community college, especially *if* and *how* they described taking a role in addressing racial equity. In sharing our results, we begin with a descriptive summary of the mission and purpose statements that we analyzed (Table 1). Our first finding highlights the articulated function and purpose of IR within the 108 community colleges we examined. Our second finding emphasizes the (in)visible racial equity discourse within OIR mission statements.

Summarizing our discursive results

Our study captured how each OIR: a) articulated its function on campus, b) focused on race and equity, and c) mentioned student success in their purpose and mission statements. After examining the OIR mission statements, we created three different categories to describe their function and mission within community college: passive, collaborative, and advancing.

TABLE 2 Explicit mention in mission statement

Term	#	%
Equity	15	14%
Race	0	0%
Student	52	48%
Total	108	100%

Within the 108 statements, we found 40% to use language that described their role as passive (i.e., maintain, sustain), 41% were labeled as collaborative (i.e., assist, facilitate), and 19% as advancing (i.e., improve, strive) institutional efforts for improving student outcomes. When exploring the discourse around equity, the majority (86%) did not mention the word “equity” within their mission statements. Only 15 OIRs mentioned equity in their mission statement: five simply included the word, four described equity as a process to understand, and six as an institutional result to achieve. None of the statements in our sample included the words centered on race, racism, or racial disparity (Table 2). Lastly, we assessed if the statements were student-centered and we found a near split between 52 (48%) campuses explicitly describing their role in improving student learning and success, and 56 (52%) having no mention of students at all (See Appendix for all institutions included in study).

The function and role of institutional research

A large percentage of OIRs were categorized as passive in their role related to improving racial equity. Common descriptive words under this category were “maintains,” “provides,” and “reports.” Passive IR offices stated their purpose as generating data and handing it off to decision-makers, limiting their role in the process of advancing equity. For example, Cerritos College shared, “It is our pleasure to provide institutional data, research, evaluation, and support for college planning and decision-making.” Additionally, American River College exemplified the passive nature of their role by highlighting in their mission statement that, “The Office of Institutional Research provides the district and colleges with information and research to support planning, budgeting, assessment, accreditation, policy formation, and decision-making.” As a final example of the passive category, Folsom Lake College’s OIR mission statement reads: “The Office of Institutional Research (OIR) supports the planning and decision-making processes of the college and its centers by providing current and relevant data collection and analysis.” Many within this category shared that their primary function was to generate data and deliver it to others that made decisions. To summarize, none of the aforementioned OIRs described themselves as dynamic units engaged in the interpretation of data to address student equity within the community college. Instead, OIRs in this category functioned as the producers and hosts of empirical data. In doing so, they saw themselves to be merely at the service of decision-makers who ultimately decide when and how to use the data produced by OIR.

The second set of OIR statements were found to be collaborative as they described themselves as facilitating, integrating, and assisting campus departments with planning, evaluating, and supporting any other research goals. For example, East LA College stated, “Our office seeks to fulfill the President’s commitment to include all campus constituencies and the community in planning the college’s future and to utilize research findings as the basis for the college’s evidence-driven planning model.” Similarly, De Anza College exemplified the descriptor type by stating, “We provide reports, research, and institutional data that

enable administrators, faculty, and staff to support De Anza's mission and achieve its goals by continually improving student learning and success and services to the community." Foothill College also highlighted a collaborative spirit within their OIR, specifically stating: "Institutional research is a resource for Foothill administrators, faculty, and staff and seeks to support them and their commitment to the Foothill mission of providing access to outstanding educational opportunities for all students." OIRs in this category functioned as the wheel hub seeking to be connected with every spoke on campus to achieve their institutions' mission.

The final category, advancing, described OIRs that took an active role in achieving the institution's mission and improving student outcomes. Barstow College exemplified this descriptor type, stating "College planning does not rest in a series of documents, but rather in specific actions, directions, and processes that foster student learning and pursue institutional excellence" as well as "A critical outcome for the department efforts is to carve out time to address big questions from multiple angles, developing a community of knowledge that leads to increased organizational learning." Santa Ana College illustrates the advancing category, their mission reads, "The primary directive of the department is to further the campus' understanding of equity issues, and furthermore to enable the campus to make data driven decisions that significantly impact student achievement and attainment." Long Beach City College also typified the category by stating, "The Office of IE strives to promote excellence and equity in student learning, educational practices and quality of service by establishing and maintaining a campus culture of self-evaluation and improvement at all levels of the institution." The community colleges found to be in advancing roles use data as a catalyst for conversations and action on campus to improve student learning and success.

(Racial) equity discourse

This research set out to investigate how OIRs describe their role in addressing racial equity in their work. In our analysis of racial discourse from the mission statements collected, the results suggest that OIRs do not assess the impact of institutional racism or racial disparities and do not actively engage in addressing issues of racial equity for students. None of the 108 OIRs in our sample included any race-related terms or language when referring to their role on campus. Although there were no explicit mentions of race or racial equity, a subset of mission statements did describe their role in trying to promote "equity" in more general terms.

In our analysis, we found that 15 out of 108 community college OIRs in our sample mentioned the term "equity" in their mission statements. Similar to the lack of racial discourse, over 85% of OIRs did not include any equity related terms in their espoused role and function, indicating that most OIRs are not involved in efforts to promote equity on campus. As only 15 OIRs in our sample (14%) mentioned "equity," we conducted a secondary analysis and categorized their mission statements into three areas: equity simply included, equity as a process to understand, and equity as a result to achieve.

Equity simply included

Given the minimal equity discourse, we describe the five mission statements placed in the simply mentioned category. An example of a statement in this category is from L.A. Harbor College, where they work toward institutional effectiveness by citing the areas they are

involved in, such as “enrollment management, program review, planning, accreditation, equity, SSSP, Achieving the Dream (ATD), matriculation, and other projects.” Here equity is mentioned as one of many initiatives related to their role, but it does not further explain how the OIRs understand and address the impact of equity on students. Similarly, Copper Mountain College mentioned equity as part of their reporting process in which they provided the campus with “data for the Master Plan of the College through internal and external scans, fact books, institutional effectiveness reports, equity data reports, and quantitative data.” In this mission overview, the use of equity is inserted as one in a list of reports the OIR collects, but does not detail what information is gathered to indicate an understanding of the inequities on its campus. A final example in this category is Shasta College, which maintains its institutional goals are achieved through “embracing a culture of inquiry that is driven by data-informed decisions and equity-mindedness.” Beyond stating “equity-mindedness” the articulated mission statement does not describe how equity is operationalized to guide their institutional research efforts. In reviewing these mission statements, the OIRs in the simply included category incorporate equity in a perfunctory manner to describe a formal task such as reporting “equity goals” or collecting data for “student equity” efforts on campus.

Equity as a process

Our second category, equity as a process, includes four OIRs that stated a primary role of helping to understand and identify issues of inequity at their home campus. For example, Citrus College stated, “equity, success, persistence, and completion of educational or vocational goals require proper identification of outcomes and data to hone in on targets for improvement and change.” The Citrus College OIR emphasizes recognizing outcomes and data to support efforts toward equity, but it does not describe how it will operationalize institutional research after identifying areas for improvement. The mission statement from the Santa Ana College Research Department writes, “The primary directive of the department is to further the campus’ understanding of equity issues, and furthermore to enable the campus to make data-driven decisions that significantly impact student achievement and attainment.” The role of this OIR is centered on knowing campus inequities in order to promote students’ success, but it does not give any indication of strategy and measure. Our final example for this category is Mesa College, where the office describes its role as creating “a culture of equity-minded action research, reflection, and inquiry.” This highlights the need for institutional research to be equity-minded and action-oriented in their efforts. It goes on to say, “Our mission is to build a culture of inquiry and foster data-informed decision making by providing research services, expertise, and coaching to the Mesa campus community in support of the college’s institutional effectiveness.” The college’s mission statement frames equity as an anchor for their research activities and approach to becoming a “leading college of equity and excellence.” The primary function for OIRs in this category is to increase awareness of equity issues by decision makers on their campus as it directly impacts the success of its students.

Equity as a result to achieve

The last category in our analysis, equity as a result to achieve, included six OIRs. This category describes mission statements that promote strategies and planning that seek to achieve the development of equity on campus. Skyline College characterizes this category

by providing “leadership in planning, research, and assessment to help better understand our students, programs, and community in order to carry out a rigorous institutional effectiveness agenda that focuses on student equity, success, and achievement.” Student equity and success are primary objectives at Skyline Community College; their IR understands the value of using research strategies to understand and address the needs of its students. At Cuyamaca College, the Institutional Effectiveness, Success and Equity (IESI) Office, conducts institutional research to provide “information to enable data-driven decisions that support student success and equity.”

With equity as a focus in their function, they go into further detail stating, “transparent availability of information helps decision-makers at all levels (including, but not limited to students, faculty members, classified professionals, and administrators) identify practices and processes that effectively enhance the holistic student experience for our diverse student community.” This statement indicates that Cuyamaca College interprets the role of institutional research as one that fosters equity. It achieves this by being fully accessible to the entire campus community in an all-inclusive effort to promote equitable student outcomes and experiences. A final example of equity as a result to achieve is from the Office of Institutional Effectiveness at Long Beach City College. This office promotes “excellence and equity in student learning, educational practices and quality of service by establishing and maintaining a campus culture of self-evaluation and improvement at all levels of the institution.” This mission statement suggests that Long Beach City College is centering its efforts to foster equity in areas related to student outcomes. It does so through an iterative approach of self-analysis to enhance how the institution as a whole can uphold its commitment to equity. Through our analysis, it was evident that examples in this category delineate the function and role of IR offices as actively pursuing research endeavors on campus that lead to more equitable results.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

We assessed how 108 OIRs in the California Community Colleges system characterized their purpose and function on campus as articulated in their mission statements. In particular, we focused our analysis on how OIRs described their role, if any, in identifying and addressing issues of inequity. Our interrogation of these statements was guided by critical race discourse analysis (CRDA), which helps to decipher the ways educational institutions discuss or disregard the topics of race and racism in their formal documents (Briscoe & Muhammad, 2015). The results from our analysis highlighted a lack of racial discourse, minimal engagement with issues of equity, and the majority of offices describing their role on campus as a passive unit that only reports out data for institutional leaders to make decisions. Additionally, our findings suggest that even when OIRs have a focus on equity, only a small percentage operationalize equity as a goal to achieve through their purported mission, purpose, and function on campus.

The results of our study raise two important implications for higher education and the field of institutional research. First, the results uncover the ways OIRs describe themselves in perfunctory ways and the need for these academic units to reconsider their role on campus. Second, the lack of racial and equity discourse we uncovered in the mission statements examined should prompt OIRs to reconsider their unit as an active collaborator and critical part of broader institutional efforts to promote equity and address challenges faced by minoritized students. Below, we discuss two important elements to help OIRs embed equity into their everyday work and foster a more collaborative approach to enhance student success on campus.

Shifting the espoused perfunctory role of OIRs

In answering our first research question, we divided the 108 mission statements into three categories. A large segment of OIRs in our study were identified as “passive” as they characterized their role as just “delivering data” or “producing information.” Offices in the collaborative category described their role as “facilitating data-informed decision-making” and “assisting the college in its efforts to improve effectiveness.” Our results align with recent work (Abrica, 2018; Abrica & Rivas, 2017; Baxter, 2020; Zerquera et al., 2018) that find OIRs maintain a traditional role of collecting, analyzing, and reporting data to relevant campus stakeholders without engaging in work that seeks to disrupt longstanding inequities. Baxter (2020) notes that sustaining these traditional roles may be held because institutional research as a field is “positivist-leaning and predominantly white” which places a focus on delivering objective data and evidence that is devoid of meaningful insight that can address disparities in outcomes (p. 2).

In our work, we identified a small subset of OIRs that articulated an active role seeking to “enhance decision making” and “promote a culture of evidence and inquiry.” The OIRs categorized as advancing also had the highest share of mission statements that mentioned equity as part of their function and role. These OIRs serve as models to help the broader field to redefine their roles and adopt a more actively equitable approach to their work. Considering the undeniable marginalization people of color have experienced in almost every sphere of American society, it is important to understand what disparities minoritized students face in their pursuit of higher education. OIRs must reflect on their roles on campus, recognize the need to shift their purpose, and expand their capacity and influence to use data, evidence, and inquiry to make significant improvements in the success and equity of students, especially racially minoritized.

As a result of our research, we are advocating for OIRs to revisit their stated role and purpose on campus and consider the ways they can be more active, integrated, and involved with the decision-making processes that seek to improve educational equity. In order to address inequity, OIRs must see their role and function as critical units on campus leading discussions around existing equity gaps and efforts to try to mitigate them. Part of this work is also pushing back against institutional structures and cultures that seek to limit the type of collaboration OIRs are involved in (Hernández et al., 2018). Scholars note that, at times, OIRs are inhibited by institutional cultures that only see the unit as the “number crunchers” or campus structures that do not value connecting institutional research with broader social justice or equity efforts taken on (Baxter, 2020; Zerquera et al., 2018). Individuals within OIRs should consider themselves as agents of change when it comes to equity on their campus. In order to embed equity-mindedness in their role, OIRs can revise their mission statements, purpose, and values to reflect a more equity-centered approach to their work and goals. The process of revision involves a critical introspection of reviewing the OIRs capacity and resources to operationalize equity in the different tasks they are assigned by their campus.

Embracing race-conscious and equity-minded approaches

Assessing the mission statements of OIRs in community college, we documented the ways these texts omitted any mention of race and minimal inclusion of equity in their mission statements (Briscoe & Khalifa, 2015). The lack of racial discourse in these statements aligns with scholarship that argues that “equity and advocacy for racial minority students are not routinely part of IR work” (Abrica & Rivas, 2017, p. 44). The reluctance to name or

address issues of racial equity on campus has the consequence of sustaining longstanding disparities in education for students of color (Carter et al., 2017). Through these findings, this research provides a bird's eye view of the current state of institutional research in California Community Colleges. This analysis can start the process of transforming institutions in higher education to push for the race-conscious inquiry that can obstruct the racist norms that impair the "equitable educational experiences" of minoritized students (Baxter, 2020).

As Abrica and Rivas (2017) noted, OIRs are seemingly "divorced from considering racial/ethnic disparities in student experiences and outcomes" (p. 44). Our data find that OIRs do not engage issues of racial inequity specifically or student equity more broadly. Baxter (2020) argues that "the roles of IR must be expanded and center racially conscious modes of measuring and enhancing institutional effectiveness" (p. 4). We recommend professionals within institutional research begin to explore how concepts like equity-mindedness (Bensimon, 2007) and race-consciousness (Felix et al., 2015) can be applied to data collection, inquiry process, and reporting being done. It is imperative for OIR staff to enhance their competencies around racial equity and be equipped to better address racial disparities through an increased knowledge of race and racism as it relates to their role in higher education. Having a better understanding of racial disparities can begin to orient institutional researchers to become equity-minded through their work. In this work, we must consider that race is always present, and whether we acknowledge it or not, systemic racism has historically and currently created differentiated results for racially minoritized students. As such we should consider the following questions to shape and revise institutional research practices:

- How do OIRs recognize that race and racism exist and permeate the existing policies, programs, and practices that produce disparities on campus?
- How do OIRs acknowledge their role in not just identifying disparities, but advancing equity on campus?
- How can OIRs interrogate their own purpose and practice, examining their historic roles as well as what they can be doing in our current context?
- What changes are necessary for OIRs to become more equity-oriented, race-conscious, and advocacy-driven?

To begin to address the prevalent racial disparities in higher education, OIRs must think about the systemic barriers to student success; contending with issues of white supremacy that undergird the founding of postsecondary education, capturing the racial climate on campus, recognizing a history of exclusion and marginalization, as well as understanding how prior policies may have exacerbated inequities for racially minoritized students. Baxter (2020) summarizes the shift, stating "IR professionals must be reimagined as facilitators of organizational learning about race and racism and be empowered to lead data-informed efforts to narrow the disparities in opportunities, experiences, and outcomes that Black, Latinx, and other racially minoritized students routinely face." Given our current social context, under the COVID-19 pandemic and increased visibility of systemic racism, OIRs can and should be leading inquiry and conversations that help our institutions make decisions that can address and mitigate racial disparities. The necessity of race-conscious inquiry and equity-minded approaches to institutional research is needed now, more than ever.

CONCLUSION

Our study illuminated the articulated purpose of Offices of Institutional Research and how they frame their role in addressing racial equity in community college. These findings are critical as OIRs serve a central role in understanding and identifying inequities in higher education through the collection and analysis of data as well as providing recommendations for how campus leaders should move forward. The lack of racial discourse in our results mirrors what Baxter (2020), as well as Abrica and Rivas' (2017), have continuously advocated for, institutional research offices that position themselves to lead equity-oriented planning and work toward racial justice in higher education. The strategies we recommend involve reassessing the foundational philosophies on which the OIRs are built upon and formulating a mission statement that reflects their responsibility to students and the institution as well as the intentionality to do work that is conscious of racial equity. Central to this strategy is the need for constant discussions on race and racism among OIRs to ensure that a recognition of educational inequities can become central to the work of institutional research. Within these discussions, IR personnel can have the space to engage in reflecting on their own biases and how that may (re)produce (in)equity for minoritized students. With recent calls to action around equity and racial justice, OIRs are in a key position to support community college efforts to meaningfully engage and collaborate across campus to identify and address root-causes of inequity and propose innovative strategies that can make a difference for racially minoritized students.

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ENDNOTE

¹ We use "Office of Institutional Research" to describe the academic unit within community colleges dedicated to research, planning, and effectiveness. In our research, there were over 40 different descriptors for these units, but OIR was the term most commonly used for the office overseeing data collection, analysis, and reporting on campus.

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APPENDIX A: OFFICES OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH IN THE CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES SYSTEM

Community college	Office name	Mentioned students	Mentioned equity	Mentioned race
Allan Hancock College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness (IE)			
American River College	Office of Institutional Research			
Antelope Valley College	Department of Institutional Effectiveness, Research and Planning			
Bakersfield College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness	X	X	
Barstow College	Office of Institutional Research	X		
Berkeley City College	Office of Institutional Research	X		

Community college	Office name	Mentioned students	Mentioned equity	Mentioned race
Butte College	Planning, Budgeting, and Assessment (PBA)			
Cabrillo College	Planning and Research Office	X		
Canada College	Office of Planning, Research and Institutional Effectiveness (PRIE)	X		
Cerritos College	Institutional Effectiveness, Research and Planning (IERP)	X		
Cerro Coso Community College	Office of Institutional Research	X		
Chabot College	Office of Institutional Research (OIR)	X	X	
Chaffey College	Office of Institutional Research	X		
Citrus College	Office of Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness (IRPE)	X	X	
City College of San Francisco	Office of Research and Planning			
Clovis Community College	Institutional Research	X	X	
Coastline Community College	The Coastline Department of Institutional Research, Planning, and Effectiveness	X		
College of Alameda	Office of Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness (RPIE)	X		
College of Marin	Office of Planning, Research & Institutional Effectiveness (PRIE)	X		
College of San Mateo	Institutional Research			
College of the Canyons	Institutional Research, Planning and Institutional Effectiveness			
College of the Desert	Institutional Research	X		
College of the Redwoods	Office of Institutional Research (IR)			
College of the Sequoias	Office of Research, Planning, & Institutional Effectiveness (R-PIE)			
College of the Siskiyous	Research and Evaluation	X		
Columbia College	Office of Research and Planning	X		
Compton College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness			
Contra Costa College	District Office of Research and Planning	X	X	
Copper Mountain College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness		X	
Cosumnes River College	Equity and Institutional Effectiveness			
Crafton Hills College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness, Research and Planning	X		
Cuesta College	Office of Institutional Research	X		
Cuyamaca College	Institutional Research	X	X	
Cypress College	Institutional Research and Planning Office	X		

Community college	Office name	Mentioned students	Mentioned equity	Mentioned race
De Anza College	De Anza Research and Planning Office	X		
Diablo Valley College	Research, Planning, and Evaluation Committee (RPEC)			
East LA College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Advancement (OIEA)	X		
El Camino College	Office of Institutional Research and Planning (IRP)	X		
Evergreen Valley College	Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness (RPIE)	X		
Feather River College	Institutional Research and Planning Office (IRPO)			
Folsom Lake College	Office of Institutional Research (OIR)			
Foothill College	Office of Institutional Research and Planning	X		
Fresno City College	Institute Research, Assessment, and Planning Office	X	X	
Fullerton College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness (IE)	X		
Gavilan College	Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness (RPIE)	X		
Glendale Community College	Research, Planning and Grants Office			
Golden West College	Office of Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness (ORPIE)	X		
Grossmont College	College Planning and Institutional Effectiveness Office (CPIE)			
Hartnell College	Institutional Research Office			
Imperial Valley College	Office of Institutional Research	X		
Irvine Valley College	Office of Research, Planning, and Accreditation	X		
LA City College	Office of Research			
LA Harbor College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness	X	X	
LA Mission College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness			
LA Pierce College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness	No data available		
LA Southwest College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness			
LA Trade-Tech College	Office of Research and Planning			
LA Valley College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness	X		
Lake Tahoe Community College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness	X		
Laney College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness	X		
Las Positas College	Office of Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness			
Lassen College	Office of Institutional Research			
Long Beach City College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness (IE)	X	X	
Los Medanos College	Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness	X		

Community college	Office name	Mentioned students	Mentioned equity	Mentioned race
Madera College	College Office of Research & Evaluation (CORE)	X		
Mendocino College	Institutional Research Office	No data available		
Merced College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness			
Merritt College	Office of Institutional Research	X		
MiraCosta College	Office of Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness (RPIE)	X		
Mission College	Research and Planning	No data available		
Modesto Junior College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness	X	X	
Monterey Peninsula College	Institutional Research	X		
Moorpark College	Division of Institutional Effectiveness, Grants and Planning			
Moreno Valley College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness (IE)			
Mt. San Antonio College	Research and Institutional Effectiveness Department (RIE)			
Mt. San Jacinto College	Institutional Research			
Napa Valley College	Office of Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness (RPIE)	X		
Norco College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness	No data available		
Ohlone College	Office of Research and Planning			
Orange Coast College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness	X		
Oxnard College	Institutional Effectiveness	X		
Palo Verde College	Institutional Research	No data available		
Palomar College	Office of Institutional Research and Planning			
Pasadena City College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness			
Porterville College	Office of Research	No data available		
Reedley College	College Office of Research & Evaluation (CORE)	X		
Rio Hondo College	Institutional Research and Planning Office	X		
Riverside City College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness			
Sacramento City College	Planning, Research, and Institutional Effectiveness (PRIE)	X		
Saddleback College	Office of Planning, Research and Accreditation (OPRA)			
San Bernardino Valley College	Office of Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness			
San Diego City College	Office of Institutional Research	X		
San Diego Mesa College	Office of Institutional Research and Planning		X	
San Diego Miramar College	Office of Planning, Research and Institutional Effectiveness	X		
San Joaquin Delta College	Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness	X		

Community college	Office name	Mentioned students	Mentioned equity	Mentioned race
San Jose City College	Research, Planning, and Institutional Effectiveness (RPIE)	X		
Santa Ana College	Research Office	X	X	
Santa Barbara City College	Office of Institutional Assessment, Research, and Planning			
Santa Monica College	Office of Institutional Research	X		
Santa Rosa Junior College	Office of Institutional Research			
Santiago Canyon College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Assessment	X		
Shasta College	Office of Research and Institutional Effectiveness		X	
Sierra College	Planning, Research, and Resource Development Office			
Skyline College	Office of Planning, Research and Institutional Effectiveness (PRIE)	X	X	
Solano Community College	Research and Planning	X		
Southwestern College	Office of Institutional Research and Planning (IRP)			
Taft College	Institutional Assessment, Research & Planning	X		
Ventura College	Institutional Effectiveness			
Victor Valley College	Office of Institutional Research			
West Hills College Coalinga	Office of Accreditation, Research, Institutional Effectiveness, and Planning			
West Hills College Lemoore	Office of Accreditation, Research, Institutional Effectiveness, and Planning			
West LA College	Office of Institutional Effectiveness	X		X
West Valley College	Office of Institutional Research	No Data Available		
Woodland Community College	Office of Planning, Research, and Student Success (PRSS)	X		X
Yuba College	Division of Student Success and Institutional Effectiveness	X		X

APPENDIX B: ANALYTIC PROTOCOL

In what ways do Institutional Research Office embed racial equity discourse into their mission and purpose statement?										
Institutional characteristics		Purpose/Mission			Discourse			Action		Notes
Overview description	Institution name	Office name	Primary purpose	Action words	Descriptor type	Student-centered	Equity-focused	Equity discourse interpretation	Who benefits?	What can be achieved? interpretation