Redefining Putting Students First

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I first encountered the NILOA white paper, *Equity and Assessment: Moving Towards Culturally Responsive Assessment*, as I was preparing to teach an assessment in student affairs class to staff for the first time. The text that I use for the course does not address issues of diversity in assessment, so I sought materials that would provoke discussion and challenge our assumptions. On both fronts, this text succeeds.

When paired with a conversation about ethics, which is how I teach it, I am hard pressed to understand how being ethical and being culturally responsive are different from each other. To me, and to my students, being ethical includes being culturally responsive. You cannot be ethical if you are not attending to and engaging with all students; being ethical means being culturally responsive. For context, I am using Montenegro and Jankowski's (2017) definition of culturally responsive assessment:

> Culturally responsive assessment is … assessment that is **mindful** of the student populations the institution serves, using **language that is appropriate** for all students when developing learning outcomes, **acknowledging students' differences** in the planning phases of an assessment effort, developing and/or **using assessment tools that are appropriate** for different students, and being intentional in using assessment results to **improve learning** for all students. Culturally responsive assessment involves being student-focused, which does not simply mean being mindful of students. (p. 10)

And Kitchner's (1985) five principles of ethics in research and assessment:
- Respect autonomy (honor privacy, avoid coercion);
- Do no harm (do not put students at risk);
- Benefit others (fair treatment of all participants);
- Be just (equal access and distribution of resources; impartiality); and
- Be faithful (revealing the truth).

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What is important about this conversation is that both of these ideas help us to become better student affairs professionals. We are taught from our first course in student development theory, that we should be putting students first. For so long, however, which students are put first has been narrowly defined, whether as a function of statistical generalizations, methodology, or racism. Now we have a path forward that enables us to engage more deeply with our students to understand their experiences and to design learning and assessment tools that speak to them and invite them to bring more of themselves into their learning.

In essence, Montenegro and Jankowski are asking us to be our best selves as higher education professionals, and to practice the values we were taught in graduate school about putting students first, being inclusive, and engaging with all students. When we begin to explore what it means to put students first, however, the conversation becomes uncomfortable because it requires us to shift our perspective away from seeing ourselves as the only experts and toward seeing our students also as the experts—of their experiences. Montenegro and Jankowski encourage engaging with students in every phase of a program's development: from designing learning outcomes to determining how those outcomes will be assessed and understanding the results of those outcomes. In this way, the assessment process becomes a tool for achieving our goals, rather than a task that must be completed (P. K. Shefman, personal communication, 2016). That is when the real work begins. It is also when staff start getting uncomfortable and challenging this approach.

Unless and until we are able to start challenging the assumptions that we bring to our work, however, we will continue to perpetuate the status quo in education and elsewhere. Montenegro and Jankowski are joined by others who have taken a critical look at how we approach our work in order to challenge the status quo. "A critical framework challenges the ability of practitioners to be neutral and unbiased because the practice of assessment is inextricably linked to the identities held by the practitioner such that, as individual leaders, we practice within norms, assumptions, values, beliefs, and behaviors originating in our multiple identities" (Chávez & Sanlo, 2013, p. 9). As a practitioner, I need to be aware of my biases and actively work to reduce them by engaging in culturally responsive assessment practices. This can include engaging early and often with a diverse group of stakeholders, doing member checking of qualitative data, using consistent and relevant demographics questions and disaggregating data, sharing data with others to expand our awareness of student experiences, and listening/being open to criticism and feedback.

I do not believe there is one right answer to becoming a more culturally responsive educator, nor do I believe we should set aside our years of education and experience. I think this white paper is challenging us to find a new way to incorporate our knowledge and expertise into our work with students so that we can guide their learning while also learning about them. In fact, it is a much more relational way of engaging with our students and inviting them all into the work of learning, growth, and development. In this way, I believe we will become more invitational, inclusive, and innovative in our work. In order to do this, however, we will need to be willing to set aside our assumptions and habits so that we can learn from our students and together create learning experiences that engage, challenge, and support them all.

References:

Chávez, A. F., & Sanlo, R. (Eds.). (2013). *Identity and leadership: Informing our lives, informing our practice*. Washington, DC: NASPA Publications.

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Montenegro, E., & Jankowski, N. A. (2017, January). *Equity and assessment: Moving towards culturally responsive assessment* (Occasional Paper No. 29). Urbana, IL: University of Illinois and Indiana University, National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA).

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