



EDUCATION

# ‘EQUITY 2030’ HIGHER ED’S BRAVE NEW WORLD

Minn State’s new system-wide equity goal undermines its aim of providing a quality education.

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BY KATHERINE KERSTEN



**T**he Minnesota State College and University System — our state’s largest higher education system, with 54 campuses — is embarking on a radical experiment. It has adopted a new plan, “Equity 2030,” to “eliminate” all academic gaps among students of different racial and ethnic groups by 2030. The plan will make balancing outcomes by skin color, not academic excellence and enhanced student learning, the system’s #1 priority.

Equity 2030’s fundamental premise is that students are not responsible for their own educational success. If they fail, the fault lies entirely with racist teachers. Going forward, Minn State faculty must find a way to engineer identical outcomes among all demographic groups. Those who don’t risk being

labeled racist or could face daunting job consequences.

Minn State’s sweeping new “equity” agenda will have widespread impact and threatens to undermine the quality of education at all its institutions. The system’s seven universities and 26 community and technical colleges, which include Metropolitan State University, St. Cloud State University and Hennepin Technical College, offer courses of study from post-graduate degrees to welding and auto mechanics. About one-third of its students are members of minority groups.

The “Equity 2030” crusade is a project of Chancellor Devinder Malhotra and his Office of Equity and Inclusion. The plan requires institutions to achieve absolute “parity” in group outcomes on measures ranging from “course success” and retention rates, to post-graduate outcomes, to participation in honors programs and high-demand majors.

This will be a monumental challenge. Today, in Minnesota and across the nation, massive academic differentials exist between students of different races and ethnicities in reading and math performance, with black, Hispanic and American Indian groups, on average, lagging well behind whites and Asians.

“The fact is, many of our students lack basic knowledge,” explains one Minn State faculty member. “Some students in our science and math courses can’t add decimals, work with fractions, or read charts and graphs. Some in our English courses can’t write a coherent paragraph.”

So why have Minn State authorities publicly committed to erasing all group differentials in academic achievement? Because they believe the gaps’ sole cause is white racism, which they intend to root out across the system.

“Institutional racism,” declares the Office of Equity and Inclusion’s “Equity by Design Campus Team Toolkit,” “is an entrenched characteristic of colleges and universities that has to be dismantled with strategies that are color

conscious, informed by critical race theory and systemic.”

Minn State’s equity agenda will require a top-to-bottom audit across the system, under the watchful eye of Equity and Inclusion bureaucrats. “We recognize” that achieving equity will “require new institutional structures,” “cultures,” “practices” and “routines,” the Toolkit declares. The aim is to “apply a magnifying glass” to “intentionally rethink” how the system operates “day-to-day.”

Many faculty members are concerned that the Equity 2030 plan is deeply misconceived, and over time will seriously erode educational quality.

“Teachers want to help all students — that’s why we’re here,” a faculty member explains. “But the administration has given us no evidence this ‘equity’ approach has worked to improve student learning anywhere, and

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they’ve provided us no tools to do it.”

“The truth is, there’s nothing about actually improving student learning in this plan,” he adds. “It’s all about getting the numbers right on paper.”

He concludes with an obvious question: “In the future, will I have to give a proportional number of A’s, B’s, C’s and F’s to each racial group in my classes?”

Equity 2030’s real agenda appears to be entrenching Equity and Inclusion apparatchiks and their allies as a permanent linchpin power on campus. The plan’s goal is utopian: Equity will not be achieved until “data show *no*



MINNESOTA STATE  
Office of Equity and Inclusion



## Equity by Design Campus Team Toolkit

Minnesota State Colleges & Universities

Josefina Landrieu - Priyank Shah - Tarrence Robertson

The Equity Toolkit, which aims to “intentionally rethink” the way Minn State colleges and universities operate.

*disparities* in educational outcomes... at *all levels of an institution*” (emphasis added).

Remarkably, this revolution, which will profoundly alter the system’s mission, is being imposed across the 54 Minn State campuses without consideration or approval by the Minnesota Legislature, which represents taxpayers who underwrite the system to the tune of more than \$2 billion a year.

### The ideology behind Equity 2030

“Equity,” as Minn State uses the term, does not have its common sense meaning of “fairness.” It means the opposite — “the proportional distribution of desirable outcomes” across demographic groups, in the

words of the Equity by Design Toolkit.

Equity is not to be confused with “equality,” which is “equal treatment,” whereas “equity refers to outcomes,” according to the Toolkit. Indeed, equal treatment may even be “detrimental to equitable outcomes.”

As any parent can tell you, it’s impossible to dictate identical academic outcomes, even among the children of one family. But Minn State’s utopian plan faces a particularly sobering reality: In 2021, 63 percent of our state’s white and 62 percent of Asian high school students could read at grade level, among those who took the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments. For black,

Hispanic, and American Indian students, the figures were 36 percent, 37 percent, and 29 percent, respectively.

Parity will be even harder to achieve at institutions like Normandale Community College (which has committed to attain “equity” by 2025) and Southwest Minnesota State University in Marshall, which have many high school-aged Post-Secondary Enrollment Options (PSEO) students. These students are disproportionately white and tend to have stronger academic backgrounds than degree-seeking students, on average.

So how does Minn State’s Office of Equity and Inclusion propose to erase these long-standing academic differentials in just a few semesters of college?

One way, of course, is to lower or eliminate academic standards, so that grades are no longer awarded on the actual quality of a student’s performance. That’s what Minneapolis

public high schools have done in their quest for “equity.”

In 2020, for example, at Roosevelt High School, black students’ graduation rate was 77 percent, but only 23 percent were proficient in reading and 10 percent in math, among those who took state tests in 2019. Hispanic students’ graduation rate was 74 percent, but a mere 17 percent of those tested in 2019 were proficient in reading and 18 percent in math.



The Office of Equity  
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“Equity” — *equal outcomes* — has been achieved on paper, but at a devastating cost: A high school diploma has become essentially meaningless as schools graduate kids sorely lacking in the necessary skills they need to be successful adults.

### “Equity-mindedness” versus “deficit- mindedness”

The theory behind Equity 2030 is, at base, the brainchild of one woman: Estela Bensimon of the University of Southern California, according to the Equity by Design Toolkit. It is based on the assumption — wholly unsubstantiated by reality — that all people, by nature, will perform the



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same, unless artificial barriers erected by hostile groups prevent them.

Bensimon, and the Equity 2030 plan, maintain that what creates these unjust, racist barriers, and so produces all demographic academic gaps, is “whiteness,” which the Toolkit never defines. Racism is said to take several forms, including “cultural” (“the idea that behaviors and values associated with white people” are “automatically better or more normal”) and “structural” (“the normalization and legitimation of an array of dynamics... that routinely advantage Whites” throughout “the entire social fabric”).

Only white people can be racist, the Toolkit maintains, because only they have the “power” to impose their biases on others.

To eradicate white racism, according to the Toolkit, all Minn State personnel must reorient the way they perceive reality by moving from a “deficit mindset” to an “equity mindset.” A “deficit-minded” educator “blames students” for their lack of academic success by viewing racial disparities as a function of the students’ own shortcomings, including lack of “proficiency” or “preparedness” to learn, in the Toolkit’s words.

An “equity mindset,” by contrast, maintains that poor student performance is entirely the fault of discriminatory teachers and schools. Students’ academic preparation, ability, and study habits are said to play no role in outcomes, which are wholly attributed to racism.

Equity 2030 forbids the use of so-called “deficit-minded phrases” to explain student failure. Examples of phrases deemed problematic include, “students don’t come here prepared” or “aren’t studying in the right ways or studying enough.” The Toolkit declares that Minn State can eliminate student performance gaps on every measure if all personnel make three “equity-minded” commitments:

- To move from “college-ready students” to “student-ready” colleges;
- To shift accountability to the institution rather than to the students; and
- To be “color-conscious,” not “color-blind.”

System authorities emphasize that total buy-in to the Equity 2030 plan is “critical” to the campaign’s success. For Minn State personnel, dissent is not an option.

### Equity teams and how they operate

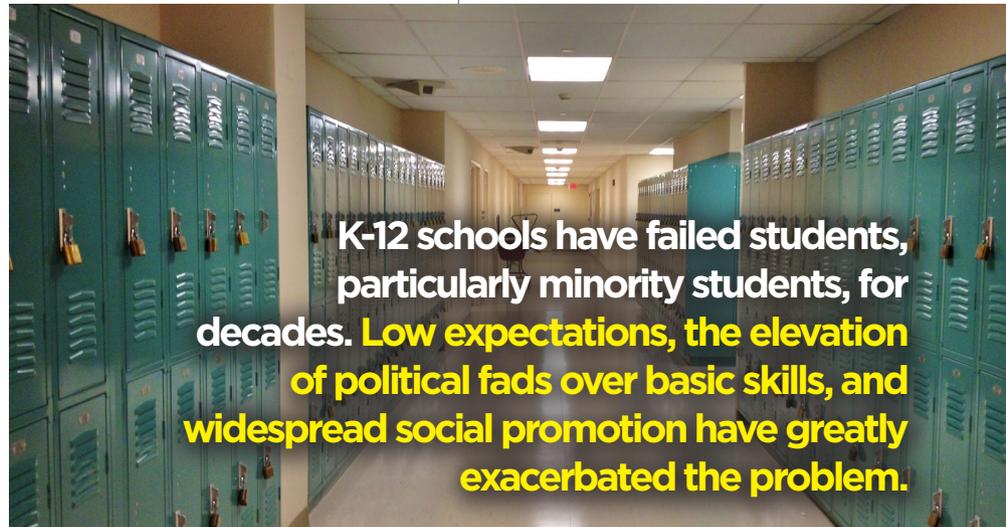
The Office of Equity and Inclusion will oversee creation of Minn State’s brave new world. The Toolkit recommends that each institution name a team of “change agents” — six to 10 administrators, faculty, students and others — who will advise institutional leaders and build a campus equity “coalition.”

The equity teams, backed by the chancellor’s office, have “discretion and latitude” to “conduct a deep dive into identifying equity gaps,” and

a “difficult,” time-consuming process, and “you will likely get uncomfortable.” They are pressured to confess their personal “biases” — i.e., to “be open to seeing...your own privilege (especially for those who hold the privilege of whiteness and able-bodiedness),” as well as their ignorance of “the history of race and racism.”

With consciousness thus raised, they are prepared to “assess their own racialized assumptions” and “practices,” and, finally, to commit to assuming “responsibility” for the success of marginalized student groups.

Equity and Inclusion trainers emphasize that, paradoxically, “whiteness” and racism — though toxic and pervasive — take forms today that are largely invisible. (How could



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to recommend changes designed to eliminate racist barriers. The timeline is not clear, and Minn State institutions are at different stages of implementation.

The teams’ extensive “orientation” process does not focus on identifying classroom practices that enhance students’ algebra skills or improve their ability to read for meaning, for example. Instead, training focuses on team members’ own attitudes and beliefs, and takes the form of cult-like “struggle sessions” marked by psychological manipulation that is wholly out of place at an institution of higher learning.

During these struggle sessions, participants are warned at the outset that becoming equity-minded will be

they claim otherwise 60 years after the monumental Civil Rights Acts of the 1960s?) Team members are assured they must cultivate an “equity mindset” to ferret out the invidious racist barriers said to escape detection by others.

They also learn that many such barriers are the product of “implicit” biases that white people harbor unknowingly. On the institutional level, “hidden,” “unspoken rules, language, people and policies” are said to act as “inhibitors” of equity (emphasis in original). A sharp, equity-focused eye is necessary because often, “policies and practices that appear to be beneficial actually are creating a worsening inequality.”

## Equity ideology flies in the face of common sense

Despite Equity and Inclusion authorities' full-bore assault, Equity 2030 has an uphill task in getting support for its implementation from Minn State employees for a simple reason: It doesn't accurately describe how the world works.

One faculty member explains that teachers face real-world challenges that can't be wished away.

"Some students come to class without having read the assignments, or don't understand them if they do," the teacher says. "Some don't turn in their work, or even log into online classes. Some are working night jobs and can't, or don't, have time to prepare."

A major reason, the teacher points out, is that K-12 schools have failed students, particularly minority students, for decades. Low expectations, the elevation of political fads over basic skills, and widespread social promotion have greatly exacerbated the problem. Today, he says, students who are accustomed to taking a test as many times as they want to at high school quickly fall behind at college.

"To help students do better," the teacher explains, "we have to start by acknowledging these shortfalls and devise ways to begin to address them earlier. But now we can't talk about this — it's 'deficit-minded.'"

The illogic — the fantasy, really — behind Equity 2030 stands in bold relief to the lesson of the popular 2005 film, *Coach Carter*. Based on a true story, the film depicts how a black former basketball star transforms his old high school's demoralized, losing team.

Coach Carter knows that many of his players start with economic disadvantages and have tough home lives. But he doesn't "affirm" their counter-productive habits or blame outside forces for losing to teams that work harder. The real problem, he tells them, is within their control. They are in poor physical shape, lack discipline, and are lax in practice.

He demands they work tirelessly to correct their deficits on the court and won't let them play until they raise their grades in class. Most players grumble,



## MINNESOTA STATE Office of Equity and Inclusion

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but by the film's end, they are savoring the victories their investment brings. Coach Carter has given them the key to success in basketball and in life: hard work, high standards, sacrifice and self-discipline.

Equity 2030 tries to bully Minn State faculty and staff to believe — and regurgitate back — the nonsensical notion that students' preparation, study skills and motivation don't matter, and that all students are somehow entitled to make the basketball team (or play first-chair violin in the school orchestra, or win a chess championship) but are held back merely by teacher and institutional racism.

Students generally understand this is not true, unless they are led astray by adults. As one Minn State faculty member observes, "I'll never forget what a black student at an alternative high school once told attendees at a conference I was at: 'The most important thing you can do to help me is to hold me accountable. That's when I do my best work.'"

### Equity 2030's core strategy - Putting the onus on teachers

Minn State's Equity and Inclusion czars have placed faculty in an impossible position: They demand that they equalize grades and all other academic outcomes between demographic groups, yet offer them no effective tools to increase real student achievement. Then they denounce teachers as racist if they talk honestly about the realities regarding students' lack of preparation, study skills and effort.

So how, given Equity 2030's fantasy-land premises, do Equity and Inclusion bureaucrats propose to make good on the plan's promise to equalize group academic outcomes in just a few years?

Their strategy is simple. They pass the buck — *offloading* the burden to faculty members and academic advisors, and announcing it's *up to them* individually to figure out how to get to the "right" numbers on student outcomes in their classes.

Equity 2030 doesn't openly prescribe demographic quotas in grading, but it speaks euphemistically in terms of hypotheticals like the following: "If only 20 more Black students" had "received a passing grade out of [an] entire entering cohort, Black students would [have] achieved parity with the rest of the institution's course success rate."

One faculty member recounts how this can play out in practice:

*I was dumbfounded when my academic dean presented me with data from the Office of Equity and Inclusion. They had calculated my "course success" rate — how many A's, B's, C's, D's and F's I'd given — broken down by students' race and ethnicity. They'd done it course by course, year by year, class by class.*

*"In this class," my dean told me, "if you had moved four students from this minority group to the next level, you would have met your racial proportionality goal."*

*When I asked what tools I could use to catch up students in one semester, I was told I should figure*

out how I'd been "advantaging" white students. The message from the system was that I should basically try to be a better person — not be a racist.

*But what does that mean? I've always tried to be color blind in my classes, but now I'm told that's racist too. In my online classes, I often don't even know the race of my students.*

The teacher expressed frustration at the way the administration intentionally ignores reality. "Most faculty try to make student access as easy as possible," he says. "They can email questions, and faculty have online office hours and do private Zoom sessions. But if students are not reaching out, as many aren't, they can't benefit from all we do."

For Equity and Inclusion bureaucrats, "It's not about learning," the teacher concludes. "It's about twisting the way we teach and assess our classes."

### Stigmatizing dissenters

Equity and Inclusion czars can't afford to have their ideology questioned, because it crumbles when logical analysis reveals its inconsistencies. To discourage dissent, Minn State authorities are implementing Equity 2030 in a way that can make it risky and dangerous for employees to point out that "the emperor has no clothes."

One way they swat away criticism is by smearing faculty and staff who don't fall in line as creating "obstacles" that sabotage the equity crusade.

Harkening back to Soviet-era authorities attempting to discredit dissidents to justify re-education, the Toolkit labels those who question Equity 2030's premises or methods as "resistant," insinuating they are guilty of mental or moral failings.

The Toolkit paints resisters as personally incompetent (i.e., as "not being able to notice racialized consequences," or as having an "incapacity to see institutionalized racism in familiar routines"). Alternatively, it describes them as self-deluding or dishonest (i.e., "claiming to see no race" or to "be 'color blind'").

[Emphasis added]

These dissidents are said to fear

change, or being exposed as racist. They are labeled as motivated by "deficit-minded deflection (focus away from self-change)" or by "fear about what the data will reveal (and how that effects (sic) sense-of-self)."

But what Equity and Inclusion enforcers appear to resent the most



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is a challenge to their ideology's fundamental premise: Only white racism can explain demographic academic gaps.

In fact, voluminous social science research documents the high correlation between low academic achievement and complex socioeconomic and "family risk" factors, among them out-of-wedlock births, fatherless homes, low parent education level, and time spent on leisure reading or with screens.

Faculty, staff, or administrators who point out these findings are dismissed as experiencing "discomfort" when "talking about race"; "resisting calls to disaggregate data"; or "substituting race talk with poverty or SES [socioeconomic status] talk."

The Equity by Design Toolkit uses cult-like language to warn Minn

State employees not to fall into error. The Toolkit exhorts them to "remain continuously vigilant so as to not revert to deficit-minded thinking." Above all, they must guard against falling "into the trap of blaming students for lack of proficiency, engagement or preparedness as being the cause of inequities."

### Fear discourages non-conformity

The Equity 2030 implementation process is at different stages across the Minn State system. Right now, the administration's focus is primarily on "course success" (pass) rates, say system insiders. But going forward, pressure is likely to mount on teachers who don't meet their "racially proportionate" numbers, especially at campuses in the Twin Cities metro area.

"Some faculty members I know are terrified," reports one experienced teacher. "The expectation is that our college president will be holding it over us. The message coming through is, 'You better change your ways. Start grading differently; adjust what you're doing in class.'"

Teachers on contract, in particular, "feel a lot of heat for this," adding, "If you're semester-to-semester, that's a pretty tough way to live. The way to avoid being the 'resistant' teacher is to be the easiest grader."

Even tenured faculty members are worried. "They will leverage what power they have over tenured faculty," another teacher explains. "They have power to tell you what classes you will teach and when — you could find yourself teaching Saturday morning or only at night if you don't go along."

A weary veteran faculty member sums up the unfolding scandal this way: "The saddest thing about all this is that Minn State isn't addressing the problem, but papering over it. System administrators are not saying, 'Let's do better and help these students sooner.' They're saying, 'Let's just pretend that faculty and the system are causing the gap.' The system is just setting these kids up for another rung of failure. The truth is, we are blinding ourselves on purpose." ★