UM-DPS Research Collaborative
A Working Paper

By

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The Ford Foundation recently funded “Promoting Equity in Higher Education,” as a planning project to use research to extend and improve opportunity for underrepresented students to enroll in higher education, including the University of Michigan (hereafter referred to as Promoting Equity Project). The overarching long-term goals of our project involve:

(1) Expanding and enriching the field of higher education policy research on race equity – in particular but not limited to the topics of access and retention of minority college students:

(2) Using new research to improve discourse and practice within the higher education community: and

(3) Establishing sustained, long-term capacity in the form of research consortia to accomplish goals (1) and (2).

The UM-DPS partnership began meeting in 2007 to discuss a project on math preparation for students in King High School and has expanded to consider other project options for expanding joint ventures focusing on improvement of high schools education in Detroit, with an explicit focus on improving college preparation and college access for high school student in Detroit Public Schools.
The fact that the partnership was underway encouraged the project investigators on the Ford funding project to include Detroit as one of the primary locales for the new project initiative. The proposal described the research collaborative as follows:

We aspire to develop consortia of researchers and other appropriate professionals in Washington, D.C., Detroit, and Atlanta who will establish research agendas, engage in fund raising, regularly devote attention to such problems, and work together to influence important changes in higher education. The planned studies of access and the college pipeline in these three cities will assist in developing the consortia. Some progress along the line of organizing a consortium in Washington, D.C. has already been accomplished. The consortia would also engage in substantial dissemination of its findings to promote policies and practices that improve college access and retention for public school students in the selected cities.

This working paper addresses the approach we plan to use in support of the UM-DPS Research Collaborative, as a first consortia initiated by the Promoting Equity Project. The working paper introduced the Action Inquiry Model as an organizing strategy for the collaborative and next steps for the collaborative.

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1 Edward P. St. John, University of Michigan; William Trent, University of Illinois; and John B. Williams, Public Welfare Foundation (Washington, Ed)
**Action Inquiry Model**

Most colleges and universities face challenges with respect to improving outreach to underrepresented high school students and academic support of students who do not fit existing programs and majors. Based on experiences with assessment and intervention, the Action Inquiry Model (AIM) was developed for improving outreach and academic success. AIM includes four stages (See also Figure 1):

- **Assessment**: Using research and experience to identify critical challenges facing the university with respect to the improvement of educational opportunities.

- **Organization**: Developing workgroups to collaborate on initiatives that address critical challenges; providing financial support for new initiatives; and providing release time and professional development opportunities for faculty and staff who engage in reform initiatives.

- **Action Initiatives**: Treating reforms as pilot tests of new strategies, as a means of promoting organizational learning, professional development, and student success.

- **Evaluation**: Integrating the evaluation of current programs and incorporation of new initiatives into the reform process.

The goals of the assessment process including: building a database that can be used to identify critical challenges regarding preparation and access and to provide baseline information to inform inquiry leading to action projects that address these challenges. Our focus below is on the development of the database for the project and on the uses of the database.
Identifying Possible Solutions
Building on the Understanding of the Challenge

Figure 1 Action Inquiry Model

Assessment
Examining Data

Organizing
Identifying Challenges

Challenge Area
Building on the Understanding of the Challenge

Challenge Area
Identifying Possible Solutions

Challenge Area
Pilot Testing & Evaluating

Challenge Area
Developing Action Plans

Challenge Area
Assessing Solutions

Sources: St. John, McKinney, & Tuttle, 2006
Database for Assessment

The database base for research the collaborative should include information on cohorts of students, tracking them from 9th grade\(^2\) through college entry into college. The student record systems should include information on:

- Student background (race, gender, indicators from prior education experience, whether the student is eligible for Federal Free or Reduced Cost Lunch).
- High School characteristics (specializations if any, etc.)
- High courses and grades by term for grades 9-12.
- Information on transfer within and between districts.
- Information on courses (e.g. curriculum and teacher qualifications)
- Test scores (all types and especially the ACT for junior)
- Involvement in special projects (e.g. King High School UM Math Project)\(^3\)
- College enrollment (from the National Clearinghouse).

A database of this type can be used to identify challenges, including factors that are related to drop out, graduation, and college success. Action inquiry can be used by teams of education from DPS and the University of Michigan to identify and seek funding for project initiatives that address these challenges. The action Inquiry process (Appendix) can be used to support this change process.

\(^2\) Ideally this approach should be extended to track students from middle schools. However, research to date indicates that success in 6th grade critical to high school graduation and college entry, therefore at minimum a cohort database should tract students from high school through college entry.

\(^3\) The aim of the database development is to build a capacity to evaluation interventions and provide feedback information that can inform their improvement.
Next Steps

(1) Meet to discussion strategies for developing a database. Set up follow up process to build a specific plan. Proposals will be developed for Foundation (Ford, Lumina, and others) to fund this phase of the project.

(2) Provide professional development support for DPS administrators and teacher, University of Michigan faculty and graduate students, and other interested groups in the use of action inquiry to address critical challenges.

(3) Plan meeting potential funding agencies to discuss ideas for collaborative initiative in math, crucial literacy, and other areas central to improving college preparation and access for DPS students.

(4) Develop proposals to Foundations (Ford, Gate, Lumina, Skillman, and others) to support new initiatives and their evaluation.
Attachment: Action Inquiry Process

The core of the AIM method involves work groups in action initiatives focusing on critical challenges. The key tasks in an action initiative reform process include:

1. *Build an Understanding of the Challenge.* Consider why the challenge exists. What solutions have been tried in the past, and how well did they work? What aspects of the challenge have not been adequately addressed? What aspects of the challenge require more study? Develop hypotheses about the causes for the challenges using data to test the hypotheses. Do the explanations hold up to the evidence? What more preparation might help students in your major programs?

2. *Look Internally and Externally for Solutions.* Talk with people on campus about how they have addressed related challenges. Consider best practices for retention and how they might be adapted to meet local needs. Visit other campuses that have tried out different approaches to the problem. How well would these alternatives address the challenge at your campus?

3. *Assess Possible Solutions.* Consider alternatives in relation to the understanding of the problem. Will the solutions address the challenge at your campus? How can the solutions be pilot tested? How will the solutions be evaluated?

4. *Develop Action Plans.* Action plans are needed to address the implementation of potential solutions. Consider solutions that can be implemented by current staff. If there are additional costs, develop budgets, but be aware that seeking additional funds can slow down the change process. Develop action plans with time frames for implementation and evaluation.
5. Implement Pilot Test and Evaluate. Provide feedback to workgroups and campus coordinating team. Use evaluation results to refine the solution. Evaluation can also be used as a basis for seeking additional funding from internal and external sources.

Providing professional development opportunities for faculty and staff engaged in action projects is a high priority of the AIM process. This guide should be used as an integral part of workshops that support teams engaged in major initiatives.
References Informing AIM


