

---

## **Confronting Social Inequities in Higher Education: A Conceptual Model and Lasallian Perspective**

Candace Robertson-James, DrPH, MPH<sup>1</sup>, Serita M. Reels, MPH, MCHES<sup>2</sup>, and Sara J. Shuman, PhD, MPH<sup>3</sup>

### **Introduction**

Education represents the summation of knowledge, skills, and capabilities (reasoning, critical thinking, problem solving, emotional awareness, esteem, and other cognitions) acquired through both formal and experiential learning opportunities (Hahn & Truman, 2015).<sup>4</sup> Education occurs in school, at home, and in communities and related disparities are multifaceted (Hahn & Truman, 2015). Moreover, education is a fundamental determinant of health (World Health Organization, 2008). It operates both as a component of health and a contributor to health. Definitions of health noted by the World Health Organization at the Alma Ata International Conference (1978) as well as other bodies conceptualize health as social, physical, and mental well-being and as such education promotes health through fostering acquisition of knowledge, skills, and problem solving, just as physical activity promotes health and reduces risk of a number of chronic conditions (Hahn & Truman, 2015; Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2010). Educational attainment is linked to health through many pathways. Higher educational attainment can play a significant role in influencing employment opportunities, career development, and income. It can also increase the capacity for better decision making regarding one's health, thus boosting individual agency and efficacy. It also enhances social and personal resources that are vital for physical and mental health (Shankar, Ip, Khalema, Couture, Tan, Zulla, & Lam, 2013). Additionally, education promotes protective health behaviors, reduces risk behaviors, and is associated with self-reported health status, morbidity, mortality, and life expectancy (Hahn and Truman, 2015; Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2010).

Disparities in higher education in the United States of America are widespread, including disparities in both *who* enrolls in institutions of higher education and disparities in the *quality* of the institution (Libassi, 2018). It is well documented that students of color and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds enroll in and complete college at a lower rate compared to their White and/or higher socio-economic background counterparts. For example, in 2013, 42% of 18-24-year-old Whites were enrolled in college versus 34% of Black and Hispanic youth of the same age. Once at college, only 41% of Black students enrolled in a four-year institution earned their degree within six years versus 63% of White students at four-year institutions (USA Department of Education, 2016). In the United States (USA), these inequalities in access and completion of higher education have not only resulted in a system in which Black and Latino students are less likely to obtain higher education degrees, but also resulted in a system in which students of color are overrepresented in the least selective open-access institutions of higher education and have significantly more financial debt from higher education compared to their White counterparts (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Kelchen, 2018).

While disparities in higher education enrollment and completion in the United States (USA) are well documented, as is the importance of educational achievement for the promotion of health equity, models to effectively address and eliminate the disparities at the university level are less common. Many universities have initiatives to increase student enrollment and retention; however, few initiatives articulating and addressing the root causes of racial disparities in college enrollment and completion have been identified. The eleven high impact teaching practices published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, a list which includes activities such as first-year seminar and capstone experiences, learning communities and opportunities for student research, does not make any mention of addressing the root causes of racial disparities in student enrollment and completion (Kuh, 2008). In a 2016 report describing racial inequality in higher education, the USA Department of Education highlighted several promising practices for promoting diversity on college campuses, including integrating diversity and inclusion into statements of mission, vision, or values, promoting diverse hiring practices for faculty and staff, and supplemental academic and wellness programs for students at risk (USA Department of Education, 2016). However, while many of the suggestions may be helpful in increasing diversity on campuses, they do not address explicitly the root causes of racial disparities and instead focus on promoting “diversity” without understanding why the racial disparities exist in the first place.

This essay argues that collaborative models which integrate public health concepts and practitioners can be useful to address systemic inequalities and promote health and well-being. Educational achievement is integral to the promotion of health equity and equity in education is essential to the promotion of public health and reduction of health inequities (Hahn & Truman, 2015). Therefore, this essay adds to the current literature by using key concepts from public health, including the social ecological model and social justice, to discuss the root causes of racial disparities in higher education and potential interventions that colleges/universities can use to work toward eliminating these disparities. This call for increased racial equity in higher education is rooted in the field of public health’s commitment to social justice, the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” and the mission of Lasallian institutions of higher education.

### **The Social-Ecological Model (SEM) and Educational Equity**

In 2017, US Senator Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) and US Representative Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.) introduced legislation to make public colleges and universities tuition-free for working families and to significantly reduce student debt (Sanders, 2017). The College for All Act (2017) was created to remedy the nation’s college affordability crisis, support students historically underrepresented in higher education, and increase funding for programs so more first-generation and low-income students would be able to enroll in and graduate from college. In essence, this legislation was created to recapture that elusive American Dream, a dream that is at the core of our nation’s ethos that posits that higher education is the key that unlocks the door to higher earnings, better health, and a longer, fuller life. This College for All Act demonstrated our nation’s belief, while not yet realized, in a fair and inclusive educational system that makes the advantages of education available to everyone. However, as more students go on to college, there are many still left behind.

Student success in higher education is predicated on the two dimensions of equity--fairness and inclusion. Fairness ensures that personal and social circumstances (e.g., race, gender, and socioeconomic status) are not obstacles to achieving educational potential, while inclusion ensures a basic minimum standard of education for all (Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2008). As the policy agenda for education shifts from high school completion to increasing the number of students who graduate with a degree from a community college, university, or trade school (Lawson & Lawson, 2013), it is vitally important to examine the factors that influence student success in post-secondary education and how these factors significantly impact equity and social justice.

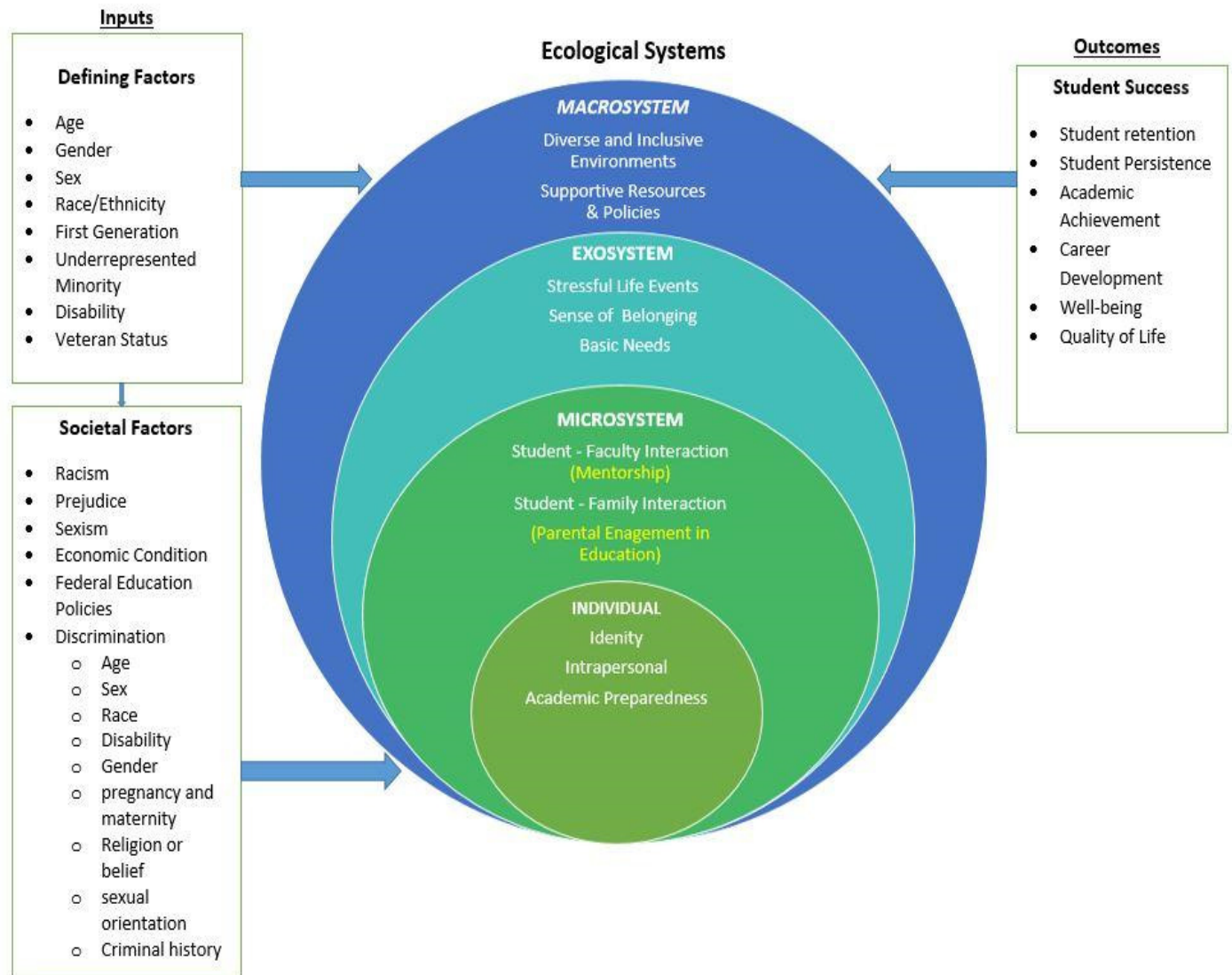
The current literature on student success looks at student engagement as a way to promote academic achievement, motivation, and successful school completion (Roundfield, et al., 2018). Student engagement is defined as dynamic, interdependent, and transactional relationships among students, family, peers, and the school environment (Roundfield, et al., 2018). As a result, student agency (e.g., lived experience, prior knowledge, and interest) and ecological influences (e.g., peer, family, and community) are connected to the organizational structures of the school (Lawson & Lawson, 2013).

An analysis of the educational system as an ecosystem is not new, but its application to the Lasallian Core Principles of equity and social justice as described in this manuscript is novel. The Social-Ecological Model (SEM) presented originally by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1977) is a theory-based framework for understanding the multifaceted and interactive effects of personal and environmental factors that determine behaviors (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). The theory explains how individual actions depend on the context in which they occur. Bronfenbrenner characterizes human interaction in a social environment composed of a microsystem, exosystem, and macrosystem, each of which and all together influence outcomes for the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). For this analysis, the framework views the student as nested within a set of communities from the most proximal (family, friend, and faculty) to the most distal (structural and institutional systems) that surround the student.

The Social-Ecological Outcomes (SEO) Model presented by Frank and Wood (2016) is particularly applicable to our analysis of student success in higher education. The SEO Model, which is informed by Astin's (1993) Input-Environmental-Output Model, focus on the primary factors impacting the success of men of color in community colleges. This model emerged from research on Black Male Success in Community Colleges, which identified five factors -- social, non-cognitive, academic, environmental, and institutional -- that influence the academic success of Black men in community college (Harris & Wood, 2016). Expanding the SEO Model to other historically underrepresented students shows how pathways for success are disrupted for some and identifies opportunities for interventions, policies, and programing that can achieve equity and transformative social justice in Lasallian education.

## Constructs of the Sociol-Ecological Model of Student Success

As shown in Figure 1, the model is composed of seven constructs.



*Inputs* - In the SEO Model, inputs are composed of defining factors and societal influences. Defining factors are variables (e.g., age, race, gender, ethnicity, disability, and generation status) that students don't control, but bring into the educational experience (Harris and Wood, 2016). These variables can influence success but can also serve as obstacles to academic achievement. For example, studies have shown that first generation, low-income students are least likely to persist and retain through college completion, as compared to high-income students with a family history of college (Thayer, Paul B, 2000; Means, et al., 2017; Cahalan and Perna, 2015). Consequently, if Lasallian institutions of higher education want to achieve equitable education attainment rates, efforts must focus on first generation, low-income students.

Societal factors, such as classism, racism, and other forms of oppression can permeate the college environment and impact student success (Means, et al., 2017). The intersectionality of these forms of systematic oppression, along with social identities, can affect a student's sense of belonging in higher education (Means, et al., 2017; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Failure to address the racist stereotypes and negative perceptions about the academic abilities of historically underrepresented students undermines campus efforts to increase a sense of belonging and success for these groups.

*Individual* - At the center of the model is the student, whose personal characteristics and beliefs influence academic success. Factors such as self-image, cultural identity, self-efficacy, academic preparation, lived experience, and worldview work together to influence student outcomes (Wolfe and Riggs, 2017). Students' belief in their ability to be successful in college, the amount of personal control they have over their success, the value they place on obtaining a college degree, and amount of energy, focus, and time they invest in pursuing their degree impact success (Harris & Wood, 2016).

*Microsystem* - The microsystem consists of interpersonal interactions with family, friends, faculty, staff, and other administrators. Student and faculty interaction can either facilitate or impede student success (Harris & Wood, 2016). For example, research with men of color attending community colleges found that men are hesitant to pursue relationships with faculty they perceived as unsupportive or uncaring, which can impact success (Wood, 2012; Flowers, 2006). On the other hand, meaningful interactions between students and faculty (such as mentorship) have been shown to increase retention and postsecondary degree pursuit in STEM disciplines for students of color and helped them prepare for a career, grow professional networks, and increase self-efficacy (Griffin, et al., 2010; Doerschuk, et al., 2016). Family and community engagement is also critical to student success and becoming an integral part of education reform efforts. Moreover, students who have encouragement from family and friends, as well as support from faculty and staff who can offer resources and help with navigating the institution, are more likely to succeed (Harris & Wood, 2016).

*Exosystem* - This system refers to the community influences that impact student success. It includes both the educational institution and community variables. Student commitments and experiences outside the classroom significantly influence success. A recent report noted that age, parental responsibilities, and work make it difficult for individuals to find time for class and contribute to the non-completion and inequity in completion rates among college students (Advisory Committee on Financial Assistance, 2012). Furthermore, many college students don't have their basic needs (e.g., adequate food and shelter) secured which makes learning difficult at best (Goldrick-Rab, 2018). The rising cost of college tuition, insufficient financial aid, and inadequate employment opportunities have increased food insecurity and housing instability among college students which has impacted college dropout rates and success (Goldrick-Rab, 2018). To mediate the effects of these external community variables, colleges must collaborate with diverse and multiple community partners to implement innovative programming to secure a student's basic needs and tackle the barriers that impede overall health, well-being, and academic success.

*Macrosystem* - This system focuses on the institutional policies, programs, and practices that influence student success in college. Unlike many models of student success, the SEO Model postulates that institutions are equally responsible for promoting student success by fostering a culture that is conducive to learning (Harris & Wood, 2016). Informed by the concept of equity-mindedness and institutional responsibility developed by Bensimon, the SEO Model suggests that in order to address effectively the outcome disparities in higher education, faculty, administrators, and student services must first address institutional deficits instead of focusing primarily on the perceived deficit of the student (Harris & Wood, 2016). Consequently, campuses can facilitate student success in college by offering supportive services that are more accessible, efficacious, and culturally tailored, as well as implementing practices that increase a student's sense of belonging and connectedness. Campuses that have implemented strategies to engage faculty in activities that promote diversity, inclusivity, connectedness, and positive socialization into campus life (such as research, community-formation events, co-curricular activities) have been shown to be effective in retaining underrepresented students (Wolfe & Riggs, 2017).

*Outcomes* - In the SEO Model, outcome variables that represent success include persistence, retention, and academic achievement (Harris & Wood, 2016). For this analysis, we add public health variables such as psychosocial development (sense of control, social status, support, and stressors), career development, and work opportunities (working conditions, resources, income, insurance, exposure to occupational hazards, housing, neighborhood, nutrition), health knowledge and behaviors (risk and promoting behaviors), quality of life, well-being, and health equity (Hahn & Truman, 2015).

### **Social Inequalities in Higher Education and the Lasallian Core Principles**

Jan McArthur (2010) asserts that the purpose of education is the advancement of social justice. The *Brown v Board of Education* decision of 1954 was imagined to create equitable access to quality education that would lead to increased social and economic opportunities for African Americans (Harper, 2008). Moreover, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act extended this vision to institutions of higher education through prohibiting institutions with race-based discrimination practices from receiving federal funding (Harper, 2008). Unfortunately, race-based disparities (as well as other types) in several dimensions of educational achievement persist and the full potential of this decision has yet to be realized (Salmi & Bennett 2014; Harper, 2008). This may reflect more historical notions of education rooted in selection and privilege (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). Equity in higher education must consider both who has access and is allowed to participate (private benefits) as well as the benefits made available to society (public benefits) (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). Social change requires a macro, micro, and individual level focus; and education is a vehicle for such change (McArthur, 2010).

Higher education is associated with positive health outcomes, earning potential, and overall life satisfaction at the individual level and lower unemployment rates, reduced utilization of social services, increased revenue from taxes, and civic engagement (Salmi & Bassett, 2014; Brennan & Naidoo, 2008). Experiences in higher education strengthen student activism, concern for the environment, understanding of diverse groups, and development of a life philosophy (Astin & Astin, 2015). An equitable and just society must ensure that education is accessible to diverse,

underrepresented, and marginalized populations (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). Moreover, despite disparities in primary and secondary education, effective models of tertiary or higher education can provide great opportunities for development (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). Nevertheless, institutions of higher education continue to face numerous challenges. These challenges may include attempts to support undocumented and underrepresented students as well as students with several issues including health, financial, and social barriers (Nair & Thomas, 2018). Higher education remains a privilege that only select individuals enjoy as admissions decisions determine who will have access to such opportunities and who will not (Nair & Thomas, 2018). Social justice approaches that promote equity models enabling all students to benefit from education can provide an important framework for leaders (Nair & Thomas, 2018).

Rooted in the mission of their Founder, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, Lasallian schools are charged with the education of the poor and marginalized in an effort to promote agency and participation in the labor market, full development of self, and meaningful contribution to society (Marius, et al., 2011). This philosophy is congruent with article 26 of the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” as it acknowledges the central role of education in the development of self and promotes attention to accessibility of education (The United Nations, 1948). This mission also calls for the advancement of teaching innovation, technology, and scholarship as Lasallian communities cultivate leaders and prepare students for life, work, and service (Christian Brothers Conference, 2017). Fulfillment of the Lasallian mission requires engagement with social justice at all levels addressed by the ecological model (Young, Sable, Curran, 2018).

Five key Lasallian Core Principles of Lasallian education include faith, educational excellence, respect for all persons (building a community of teachers and learners), inclusive and diverse communities, and concern for the poor and social justice. These principles are actualized by professionals working “together and by association” to accomplish the Lasallian mission and vision (Christian Brothers Conference, 2017). Each of these is described below as key constructs of a higher education system that promotes equity and reduces social inequalities.

### ***Faith***

Developing the spiritual identity of students is an important component of Lasallian higher education. As such, institutions of higher education must be vigilant about exploring the spiritual domains of the student experience (Astin & Astin, 2015; Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2005). Higher education reflects a commitment to the growth, development, and transformation of students. Development of spirituality and faith enables the construction of an authentic self and identification with a world that is larger than ourselves. It requires connection with humanity (Chickering, et al., 2005). However, despite concerns for promoting specific religious traditions and principles, higher education imbues priorities and values through its policies, practices, and allocation of resources. Many institutions reflect principles of dualism, scientism, consumerism, and economic individualism rather than a transformation into an authentic self that is caring, connected to others, and socially responsible (Chickering, et al., 2005). Moreover, the failure of many institutions to address gaps between desired values and principles of transformation and actual practices and policies diminishes the effectiveness of institutions of higher education as institutions of transformation (Chickering, et al., 2005).

Dimensions of spirituality may include spiritual quest (students seeking self-awareness and answers to life's mysteries), equanimity (finding meaning in life's hardships, finding peace, experiencing gratitude, feeling positive about life), charitable involvement (participation in service and helping others), ethic of caring (values related to helping others and reducing pain and suffering, promoting justice and understanding of others), and an ecumenical worldview (exploring different religious traditions, connection to humanity) (Astin & Astin, 2015). Spiritual development is enhanced as institutions provide exposure to diverse ways of "knowing, being and doing" (Chickering, et al., 2005). Participation in civic engagement and service-learning educational experiences is associated with all aspects of spiritual development described above. Similarly, leadership experiences can also provide spiritual growth. Spiritual growth has, in turn, been associated with equity and increased understanding of diverse groups (Astin & Astin, 2015). Attention to the spiritual development of students can lead to a more equitable society as it promotes global citizens committed to social justice (Astin & Astin, 2015; Chickering, et al., 2005).

Faith in the presence of God is a core Lasallian Core Principle. The Lasallian mission welcomes people of all faiths and acknowledges the existence of God (Young, et al., 2018). Lasallian examples include institutional learning outcomes that allow students to explore faith in diverse ways, offices of ministry and service as well as other opportunities to explore self, spirituality, connection to humanity, and purpose/meaning. Challenges for future consideration include integrating multicultural and diverse religious and spiritual traditions' expression of God and faith into the academic and social experiences as well as the integration of transformative practices, policies, programs, and allocation of resources that promote justice (Young, et al., 2018; Chickering, et al., 2005). Future research may explore spiritual growth as a contributor to educational achievement outcomes through the individual level (personal notions of spirituality and justice) as well as the micro (interactions that promote spiritual development, connection to humanity, and justice) and exo and macrosystems (principles guide community and institutional values and justice practices). Spiritual growth and development may also be associated with other important individual level characteristics described above (self-image, efficacy, locus of control, culture, etc.) as well as micro, exo, and macro systems that may influence education outcomes. Additional strategies for engaging in practices that support spiritual growth and development on campuses are needed and should be considered integral to achieving justice.

### ***Educational Excellence***

A commitment to promoting equity includes deliberate efforts to assess and eliminate educational achievement gaps between students from various economic strata, racial and ethnic backgrounds, religious affiliations, and other axes of identity (Collopy, et al., 2012). Equity in education assures students have the necessary supports required to succeed. Research demonstrates that underprepared students are able to reach the same benchmarks as their more prepared peers given the appropriate time and support services (Astin & Astin, 2015). Learning pedagogies that engage students in critical thinking, academic challenge, active learning techniques, and the utilization of collaborative models when used effectively have been shown to reduce gaps in educational achievement in undergraduate students (Bowman & Culver, 2018). However, without deliberate attention to classroom environments and teaching strategies, equity may not be achieved. Equitable teaching strategies maximize fairness and equity of opportunity



for all students to participate, connect, and critically engage with the content (Tanner, 2013). Integration of service learning and civic engagement models in higher education has grown tremendously and has been associated with positive student outcomes and enhanced equity (Astin & Astin, 2015). Students engaged in service learning and civic engagement courses are more likely to report civic engagement post college, vote, give to charity, participate in community initiatives, and believe that their education has prepared them for life (Astin and Astin, 2015). Students have diverse needs, and a quality education ensures the availability of resources and policies that reflect that diversity (Atchinson, et al., 2017). Kimberly Tanner (2013) proposes an assessment of equitable teaching strategies that includes evaluation of opportunities to think and talk, management of participation of all students, creation of an inclusive classroom environment, cultivation of diverse perspectives/ways of thinking, and the effective education of all students.

A Lasallian education prepares students for life, work, and service (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). It enables them to take responsibility for their education. This educational framework empowers students to become agents of change. The innovative teaching provided by Lasallian institutions promotes equality of opportunity (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). This is a key tenet of equity frameworks in that it asserts interventions should not seek to treat everyone the same but rather to provide the resources for everyone to succeed. Salmi and Bassett's (2014) dimensions for consideration include equity of access (opportunities for enrollment), results (opportunities to advance and complete studies), and outcomes (labor market outcomes). However, gaps remain in the achievement of these outcomes for diverse groups. Research suggests social capital among other variables can provide the social benefits and necessary relational connections that can facilitate the access of marginalized communities to useful information and resources (Pineda & Moronski, 2009).

Challenges for future consideration include achieving equity in higher education and the education of underprepared students (Astin & Astin, 2015). While innovative teaching strategies and environments exist, disparities in achievement outcomes persist. Additional discipline-specific educational research is needed to better guide the equitable achievement outcomes of all students. Research on integrating resilience, asset framing, and growth mindset approaches may also prove promising in promoting equity in higher education (Young, et al., 2018). Approaches that address the systemic drivers of inequalities, as well as factors that contribute to success at all levels (individual, micro, exo, macro), are also integral. Initiatives to address needs of first generation and low-income students as well as the corresponding stressors, competing responsibilities, and academic challenges are also needed and require sustainable community, governmental, and non-governmental partnerships.

### ***Respect for All Persons: A Community of Teachers and Learners (Respect for All Persons)***

Social justice practices contribute to the transformation of social institutions for the common good (Collopy, et al., 2012). This common good allows students and educators alike to maximize their potential. Concepts of common good and social justice are rooted in the principle of human dignity manifested as human rights. Human rights support individual rights and include access to the resources, freedoms, and protections necessary for full participation in society. As such, education is a basic inalienable human right (Collopy, et al., 2012; The United Nations, 1948).

Building an effective community of teachers and learners is essential for promoting equity. Communities of practice strengthen an institution's ability to overcome existing structural barriers in order to provide nurturing environments for diverse groups (Nair & Thomas, 2018). Positive interactions between and among students, faculty and others can occur during class, outside of class, and during other structured and unstructured activities (Bowman & Culver, 2018). Positive student faculty interactions are associated with academic achievement, increased feelings of support, cognitive and civic engagement (Bowman & Culver, 2018). As such, using a social justice framework, these communities acknowledge a shared humanity and provide opportunities to critically engage in and challenge content, enhance relational support, debate and dialogue in respectful environments (Nair & Thomas, 2018).

Effective communities of practice can also be used to reduce disparities in educational outcomes, as they build social capital. Social capital is integral to the success of marginalized and underrepresented groups particularly as it promotes establishments of important relationships that provide access to information and resources, opportunities, and social benefits (Brennan & Naidoo, 2008; Harper, 2008). Social capital gained through these important relationships with older students, student leaders, peers in student organizations, administrators, faculty, and staff helps students to navigate important financial barriers, provides access to a number of opportunities and resources, and offers mentorship during enrollment and post-graduation (Harper, 2008). A community of teachers and learners that values access to administrators, faculty, staff, and other students, that is involved in leadership opportunities, that provides financial resources (scholarships, internships, etc.), and that makes available other mechanisms to overcome barriers is integral to a social justice framework to reduce social inequalities in higher education.

In addressing social inequalities, an equity framework allows institutions to identify opportunities to address power inequalities through engaging its mission of teaching, research, and service (Gordon, et al., 2017). Lasallian educational communities promote respectful interactions between and dignity among all persons. Lasallians recognize the uniqueness and inalienable rights given to all individuals (Young, et al., 2018). Through its strong commitment to professional development, student-based services and programs, community-engaged courses and community partnerships, Lasallian institutions are well poised to establish communities of practice that are integral for achieving equity in higher education.

Challenges for future consideration include faculty/staff pay inequalities, the multi-faceted needs of students, social and cultural environment, mistrust, historical and present-day racial tensions, safety and mental health concerns, and meaningful assessment measures (Atchinson, et al., 2017; Christopher, 2016). Recognition of how racism and other systems of inequality influence expressions of human dignity in students and the campus community overall also remain an important consideration (Young, et al., 2018). Development of communities of practice that value and effectively integrate experiences of students and aptly acknowledge the pain and suffering endured, remain a mechanism of equity promotion (Young, et al., 2018; Christopher, 2016).

## *Inclusive and Diverse Communities*

Social justice practices require institutional commitment to diversity and inclusion throughout the university. Best practices for demonstrating a commitment to inclusion and diversity include developing formal diversity statements, developing a definition of diversity, overtly rejecting discrimination and intolerance, providing support services, integrating diverse perspectives and history of various inequalities into the curriculum, hiring, promotion and tenuring of diverse faculty and administrators, cultivating an environment where diverse groups can excel, and identifying specific offices and programs focused on issues relevant to diverse groups (Gordon, et al., 2017; Astin & Astin, 2015). A commitment to student organizations that are inclusive of diverse communities, co-curricular programs and offices such as career counseling, health services, residential life, and dining services are essential for promoting equity (Gordon, 2017). Recent movements, such as Black Lives Matter, have challenged institutions of higher education to evaluate their practices, policies, programs, budgets, and campus climate to assess how diverse groups across campus experience, benefit from, and are negatively impacted (Nair & Thomas, 2018).

Lasallian schools are communities that embrace diversity, where no one is excluded. This principle calls Lasallian institutions to be safe havens for diverse groups of learners as well as those who may not be able to access their education as effectively as others (Bilias-Lolis, et al., 2017). Lasallians call for their communities to stand in solidarity with one another and uphold the dignity of all its members including those who are suffering, vulnerable, and impacted by inequality (Young, et al., 2018). Innovative teaching environments and practices embracing trauma-informed models that promote safety, trust, collaboration and empowerment, voice, and rejection of negative stereotypes are integral to supporting diverse communities. This also includes a commitment to compassionate education in which educators utilize resiliency strategies to address challenges and needs (Bilias-Lolis, et al., 2017).

Despite the progress made in this area, challenges exist for future consideration. Attention to diversity also includes a commitment to the recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and staff (Atchinson, et al., 2017). A commitment to recruiting, retaining, tenuring, promoting, and otherwise supporting diverse faculty and staff is essential to promoting equity. Likewise, the continued support of faculty, staff, and others in facilitating conversations around issues of power, privilege, and oppression as well as utilizing effective instructional practices for diverse groups is also important (Bowman & Culver, 2018; Christopher, 2016). Moreover, admissions outreach strategies to diverse communities have allowed institutions to achieve a measure of diversity of students but have often failed to address structural and individual level inequities in preparedness and financial resources needed for college (Pineda & Moronski, 2009). Diversity initiatives have also been critiqued for failing to adequately address systemic issues related to oppression and privilege. Diversity and inclusion initiatives need to strive to increase awareness of racism and other systems of oppression as well as multicultural perspectives (Kujawa-Holbrook, 2002). In doing so, these initiatives challenge students to know the difference between race, ethnicity and culture, sex, gender (and other axes of social identity), to identify and reflect on their own stereotypes and prejudices, and to understand power, privilege, and systems of inequality (Kujawa-Holbrook, 2002). While diversity and inclusion efforts have focused on recruiting diverse students, they often neglect systems of power that control the curriculum,

voices that are excluded, and the truths students learn from the dominant culture (McArthur, 2010; Kujawa-Holbrook, 2002). Diversity initiatives of the future will need to consider how best to integrate racial and social justice principles as well as healing and restorative practices into their efforts in order to expand the scope of their activities (Christopher, 2016).

### ***Concern for the Poor and Social Justice***

Higher education has great potential as a mechanism of equity as it increases opportunity for advancement (Marginson, 2016). Through this principle, Lasallian schools are called to the awareness of the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized and to engage in the promotion of justice. However, a myriad of barriers, social and structural inequalities, impact opportunities for educational success. These barriers include inadequate knowledge, preparation, educational aspirations, support, planning, financial, and other barriers (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). Moreover, financial barriers include actual financial resources, necessary debt acquired, and the cost benefit analysis (costs outweigh benefits) (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). A social justice framework to higher education not only ensures access for diverse groups and considers root causes for inequalities but also calls for asset-based approaches to education (Nair & Thomas, 2018; Young, et al., 2018). While marginalized and underserved groups may have challenges acclimating to institutions of higher education, they also have a resiliency and strengths that should be valued. Asset-based approaches challenge leaders to look beyond a deficit model in which only limitations and challenges are acknowledged to embrace a social justice framework that values the experiences and perspectives diverse groups bring to the table. (Nair & Thomas, 2018).

Despite existing infrastructures of support, challenges persist for eliminating inequalities in academic achievement and other educational outcomes. Higher education, as currently constructed, represents a societal response to inequality rather than a uniform mechanism for enhancing equity (Marginson, 2016). Disparities in achievement based on socioeconomic status are observed early and persist (Economic Policy Institute, 18). Higher education financing remains an important challenge for marginalized and underserved groups. Policies on financial aid, comprehensive assessment of student debt, and assessment of non-education related financial resources and needs (housing, childcare, food security) are integral for success (Atchinson, et al., 2017; Salmi & Bassett, 2014). Barriers to retention persist as well. Equity policies must focus on outcomes. Effective early intervention programs and policies are also needed to ensure the preparedness and retention of students. These may include important family and community partnerships as well as policies that better support partnerships between primary, secondary, and higher education systems (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). Student data can also be used to enhance accountability and to better understand effective strategies, programs, support services, and related characteristics of students who are retained compared to those who are not (Salmi & Bassett, 2014). Developing coursework that addresses racism and other forms of inequality as systems of oppression and using a life course perspective has been associated with positive outcomes in enhancing equity in higher education (Bowman & Culver, 2018; Young, et al., 2018).

## Conclusion

Elimination of inequities in educational outcomes is necessary for the promotion of health and well-being. Guided by its mission, long history of serving diverse and vulnerable students, and commitment to excellence in teaching, Lasallian institutions are well poised to contribute to the current discourse regarding the promotion of equity and social justice in higher education. The ecological model is a useful tool to explore the various mechanisms and pathways leading to inequality. Many interventions, services, and programs focus on the individual level; however, additional innovations in addressing the more upstream and systemic contributors to inequalities are also needed. Achieving justice in educational outcomes requires effective community partnerships, utilization of a life course perspective, and a focus on the multilevel structural determinants (Trinh-Shevrin, et al., 2015). Research utilizing community participatory, intersectionality, feminist, critical race theory, and other frameworks that prioritize the voices of underserved, vulnerable, and marginalized groups is needed for the achievement of equity (Trinh-Shevrin, et al., 2015).

Institutions of higher education must remain vigilant in assessing and identifying how social determinants of health influence college campuses and inequality in achievement. The social ecological model, paired with the Lasallian Core Principles, provides a useful framework for addressing inequities in higher education. Inequalities are fueled by structural factors operating at the macro, exo, and micro systems as well as the individual level (Davis, Rivera, Parks, 2015). Moreover, a legacy of discriminatory practices interacts at all levels to influence individual level opportunity for achievement. Equity models must integrate approaches that support the development of social networks, trust, capital (community of teachers and learners and communities of practice), norms, culture (inclusive and diverse communities), safety, housing, transportation, income, employment, living conditions and other resources (concern for the poor and social justice), academic achievement and preparedness (educational excellence), and spiritual growth, development, understanding of purpose and meaning (faith) (Davis, et al., 2015). The constructs of this conceptual framework can well inform strategic multi-sector partnerships, local, community, state, and federal initiatives and policies as well as institutional programs, services, and efforts to promote social justice and equity in higher education (Davis, et al., 2015).

## References

- Advisory Committee on Financial Assistance. (2012). Pathways to Success: Integrating Learning with Life and Work to Increase National College Completion. A Report to the US Congress and Secretary of Education. Retrieved December 2018. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED529485.pdf>
- Astin, A., & Astin, H. (2015). Achieving equity in higher education: The unsatisfied agenda. *Journal of College & Character*, 16(2): 65-74.
- Astin, A.W. (1993). *What matters in college? Four critical years revisited*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Atchinson, B., Diffey, L., Refa, A., & Sarubbi, M. (2017). Education commission of the United States: Equity in Education: Key questions to consider.
- Biliias-Lolis, E., Gelber, NW., Rispoli, KM., Bray, MA., & Maykel, C. (2017) On promoting understanding and equity through compassionate educational practice: Toward a new inclusion. *Psychology of Schools, 54*: 1229-1237.
- Bowman, NA., & Culver, KC. (2018). Promoting equity and student learning: Rigor in undergraduate academic experiences. *New Directions for Higher Education, 181*. Accessed November 2018. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/he.20270>
- Brennan, J., & Naidoo, R. (2008). Higher education and the achievement (and/or prevention) of equity and social justice. *Higher Education, 56*(3): 287-302.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Towards an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist, 32*: 513-531.
- Cahalan, M., & Perna, L. W. (2015). *Indicators of higher education equity in the United States*. Washington, DC: Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education.
- Carnevale, A.P., & Strohl, J. (2013). Separate & Unequal However Higher Education Reinforces the Intergenerational Reproduction of White Racial Privilege.
- Chickering, A. W., Dalton, JC., & Stamm, L. (2005). *Encouraging authenticity and spirituality in higher education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Collopy, R., Bowman, C., & Taylor, D. (2012). The educational achievement gap as a social justice issue for teacher education. *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry and Practice, 16*(1): 4-25.
- Christian Brothers Conference (2017). Lasallian Education. Retrieved December 2018. <https://www.lasallian.info/lasallian-education/>
- Christopher, G. (2016). The time for truth, racial healing and transformation is now. *Liberal Education, 102*(4). Accessed December 2018. <https://www.aacu.org/liberaleducation/2016/fall/christopher>
- Cutler, DM., & Lleras-Muney, A. (2010). Understanding differences in health behaviors by education. *Journal of Health Economics, 29*: 1-28.
- Davis, R., Rivera, D., & Parks, L. F. (2015). Moving from understanding to action on health equity: Social determinants of health frameworks and THRIVE. The Prevention Institute. Accessed December 2018. <https://www.preventioninstitute.org/publications/moving-understanding-action-health-equity-social-determinants-health-frameworks-and>

- Doerschuk, P., Bahrim, C., Daniel, J., Kruger, J., Mann, J., & Martin, C. (2016). Closing the gaps and filling the STEM pipeline: A multidisciplinary approach. *Journal of Science Education and Technology, 25*: 682-695.
- Flowers, L. A. (2006). Effects of attending a two-year institution on African American males' academic and social integration in the first year of college. *Teachers College Record, 108*: 267-286.
- Goldrick-Rab, S. Alleviating Poverty and Promoting College Attainment in Philadelphia. Hope Center for College, Community and Justice. (2018). Accessed December 30, 2018. <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/2018-PhillyReport-web-1.pdf>
- Gordon, S., Elmore-Sanders, P., & Gordon, D. (2017). Everyday practices of social justice: Examples and suggestions for administrators and practitioners in higher education. *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis, 16*(1): 68-83.
- Griffin, K.A., Perez, D., Holmes, A.P., & Mayo, C.E. (2010). Investing in the future: The importance of faculty mentoring in the development of students of color in STEM. *New Directions for Institutional Research, 2010*: 95-103.
- Hahn, R., & Truman, B. (2015). Education improves public health and promotes health equity. *International Journal of Health Services, 45*(4): 657-678.
- Harris, F., & Luke Wood, J. (2016). Applying the Socio-Ecological outcomes model to the student experiences of men of color. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 2016*(174): 35-46.
- Harper, S. (2008). Realizing the intended outcomes of Brown: High-achieving African American male undergraduates and social capital. *American Behavioral Scientist, 51*(7): 1030-1053.
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). Excerpt from high-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter. *Association of American Colleges and Universities*.
- Kujawa-Holbrook, S. (2002). Beyond diversity: Cultural competence, white racism awareness, and European-American theological students. *Teaching Theology and Religion, 5*(3): 141-148.
- Lawson, M. A., & Lawson, H. A. (2013). New conceptual frameworks for student engagement research, policy, and practice. *Review of Educational Research, 83*(3): 432-479.
- Libassi, C.J. (May 23, 2018). *The Neglected College Race Gap: Racial Disparities Among College Completers*. Retrieved from: <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-postsecondary/reports/2018/05/23/451186/neglected-college-race-gap-racial-disparities-among-college-completers/>

- Marginson, S. (2016). Higher education and growing inequality. *Academic Matters*. OCUFA's *Journal of Higher Education*. Retrieved October 2018.
- Marius, BF., Teklemariam, A. A., & Akala, W. J. (2011). Responding to the Ideals of Lasallian Education in the Twenty-First Century: A Case Study of Saint Paul's Secondary School in Marsabit, Kenya. *Journal of Education and Christian Belief*, 15(2): 125-139.
- McArthur, J. (2010). Achieving social justice within and through higher education: The challenge for critical pedagogy. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(5): 493-504.
- Means, D. R., & Pyne, K. B. (2017). Finding my way: Perceptions of institutional support and belonging in low-income, first-generation, first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(6): 907-924.
- Nair, A., Thomas, C. (2018). A social justice approach to building community in higher education today. *Insight Into Diversity*. Retrieved October 2018. <http://www.insightintodiversity.com/a-social-justice-approach-to-building-community-in-higher-education-today/>
- Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (2008). Policy Brief: Ten steps in equity in education. Retrieved November 2018. <http://www.oecd.org/education/school/39989494.pdf>
- Pineda, D., & Moronski, K. (2009). Promoting equity in higher education: Legal, financial, and educational remedies to racial and income inequality in college access. Center for Study of Higher and Postsecondary Education.
- Roundfield, K. D., Sánchez, B., & McMahon, S. D. (2018). An ecological analysis of school engagement among urban, low-income latino adolescents. *Youth & Society*, 50(7): 905-925.
- Salmi, J., & Bassett, R. M. (2014). The Equity Imperative in Tertiary Education: Promoting Fairness and Efficiency. *International Review of Education*, 60(3): 361-377.
- Sanders, B. (2017). College for All Act Introduced. Press Release. Retrieved December 2018. <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/college-for-all-act-introduced>
- Shankar, J., Ip, E., Khalema, E., Couture, J., Tan, S., Zulla, R. T., & Lam, G. (2013). Education as a social determinant of health: issues facing indigenous and visible minority students in postsecondary education in Western Canada. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 10(9): 3908–3929. doi:10.3390/ijerph10093908
- Tanner, KD (2013). Structure matters: Twenty one teaching strategies to promote student engagement and cultivate classroom equity. *CBE Life Sciences Education*, 12: 322-331.



- Thayer, B. P. (2002). Retention of Students from First Generation and Low Income Backgrounds. Department of Education, Washington, DC.; National TRIO Clearinghouse, Washington, DC. Retrieved December 2018. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED446633>
- The College for All Act. (2017). Retrieved December 2018. <https://www.sanders.senate.gov/download/college-for-all-act?inline=file>
- The United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Retrieved December 2018. <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>
- Trinh-Shevrin, C., Nadkarni, S., Park, R., Islam, N., & Kwon, S. C. (2015). Defining an integrative approach for health promotion and disease prevention: A population health equity framework. *Journal of Health Care for the Poor and Underserved*, 26(20): 146-163.
- United States Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation and Policy Development. (2016). *Advancing Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education*. Washington, DC.
- Vaccaro, A., & Newman, B. M. (2016). Development of sense of belonging for privileged and minoritized students: An emergent model. *Journal of College Student Development*, 57: 925-942.
- Wolfe, B. A., & Riggs, E. M. (2017). Macrosystem analysis of programs and strategies to increase underrepresented populations in the geosciences. *Journal of Geoscience Education*, 65(4): 577-593.
- Wood, J. L. (2012). Black males in community college: Using two national datasets to examine academic and social integration. *Journal of Black Masculinity*, 2: 56-88.
- World Health Organization. Declaration of Alma-Ata. 1978. Accessed December 2018. [https://www.who.int/publications/almaata\\_declaration\\_en.pdf?ua=1](https://www.who.int/publications/almaata_declaration_en.pdf?ua=1)
- World Health Organization. (2008). Closing the gap in a generation: Health equity through action on the social determinants of health. Final Report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health. Accessed December 2018. [https://www.who.int/social\\_determinants/final\\_report/csdh\\_finalreport\\_2008.pdf](https://www.who.int/social_determinants/final_report/csdh_finalreport_2008.pdf)
- Young, D. M., Sable, J. J., & Curran, J. (2018). Exploring the intersections: Racial justice, our Lasallian heritage and the Catholic tradition. *AXIS: Journal of Lasallian Higher Education*, 9(2): 19-30.

## Endnotes

1. Candace Robertson-James, who is an assistant professor and director of the master of public health program at La Salle University in Philadelphia (PA), earned her doctorate in public health from Drexel University School of Public Health with a concentration in community health and prevention. She earned a master of public health degree from MCP Hahnemann University (now Dornsife School of Public Health, Drexel University).

2. Serita M. Reels earned a master of public health degree from Drexel University School of Health with a concentration in community health and prevention. She works at La Salle University in Philadelphia (PA) in the areas of grant management, university ministry, and service and support.

3. Sara J. Shuman, who is an assistant professor and director of the bachelor of science in public health program at La Salle University in Philadelphia (PA), earned her doctorate in public health from Temple University with a concentration in social and behavioral health. She earned her master of public health degree from the University of Arizona.

4. Although this journal usually requires that all citations use the Chicago Manual of Style (CMS) format, an exception has been made in this issue to allow citations to be made using the American Psychological Association (APA) format.