

Signature Assignment:

Presentation Script

Shannon Usher

College of Professional Studies, Northeastern University

EDU 6051: Culture, Equity, Power & Influence

Dr. Christopher MacDonald-Dennis

March 29, 2022

Hello everyone and welcome to my virtual presentation on my signature assignment. My name is Shannon Usher, and today I will be discussing economic inequality in higher education. Since we've been existing in a virtual space I want to take the time to reintroduce myself. I was born and raised in the South Shore of Boston, and I am a proud graduate of Notre Dame Academy, Hingham - a catholic all girls high school. I received my bachelor's in English from UMass Amherst. I have fond memories of my time there, which was spent almost entirely too involved in residential education. At the beginning of my professional career I worked for Narragansett Council in Providence Rhode Island, one of the local Boy Scouts of America offices. I have been working in the Department of Political Science here at Northeastern University for two years now; I handle all things undergraduate including curriculum planning and course scheduling, as well as coordination of all of our events.

To start, let's take a brief look at what I will talk about in this presentation. First, we'll talk a little bit about why economic inequality in higher education matters. Then, I'll walk you through the structure of the 3-day workshop I have prepared, as well as what each day looks like. I'll end with a brief summary of what participants should expect to be able to do after completing this workshop series, and even go over a few changes I might consider moving forward. Let's start with why economic inequality in higher education matters.

It is well documented that levels of educational attainment have a large impact on income; someone with a bachelor's degree makes nearly double on average that of someone who has completed high school. Additionally, degree attainment (particularly at selective colleges and universities) is perceived to be an important stepping-stone to professional and leadership positions and a general measure of traditional success. Looking historically at some of the local selective colleges and universities, only 14.1% of students at MIT came from families with

incomes less than \$30,000 in the 2000-2001 school year; at Harvard that number drops to 4.4%. Even still, we know that degree attainment is disproportionately white. According to US Census data, the percentage of the population over 25 that has a bachelor's degree has jumped from under 5% in 1947 to over 30% in 2015; however, black and hispanic students are firmly behind white students by 10-20% respectively. So what does all of this mean?

Well, young people from highwealth families are roughly twice as likely to be upwardly mobile as those from low-wealth families. This means that if someone wants to move up in our current class structure and make more money, they need a degree. The rub here is that you need money to make more money. If we look at the process of obtaining a degree, it is broken into three stages: applications, continuing enrollment, and degree completion.

We know that high school students from lower income families are less likely to apply to and attend a 4 year institution, so that already is working against us here. Of those that apply, rising costs of higher education, tuition, fees, and textbooks, mean that many students do not complete their degree; only about 6 out of 10 graduate, and as you might imagine that number drops even lower for people of color. And after graduation, they are now saddled with massive amounts of student debt. Even with the assistance of federal grants like the Pell Grant, students can't get by on that alone. The US Pell Grant in 2021 got an increase to a maximum of \$6,495 per year. That number is hardly enough for a student to pay for a year at a 4-year institution, even a state school. For reference, annual tuition at any of the UMass schools ranges from \$14,000 to over \$16,000 for an in-state student. A low income student is unlikely to have a parent who is able to co-sign a loan, which might reduce their interest or loan term. Ultimately, this means that recognizing the inequity of asking students to participate in a system where money buys their access to education is simply step one of this process.

Now that we know why it matters, let's talk about how we're going to address it. The goal of this workshop series is two-fold. First, it is my hope that this workshop allows participants to feel confident in using whatever resources they have at their disposal to create an equitable environment for all students. In this case, equity refers to all students having equal opportunities for success in higher education and beyond. Furthermore, equitable education should not include giving students the same tools; rather, it means meeting them where they are so that we can provide them with what they need. To give a disadvantaged student the same tools and resources as a privileged student is not enough, particularly when the system is stacked against low-income families and families of color.

Second, this workshop series should further the cultural proficiency of the participants. They will be better educators by understanding and valuing their unique and shared experiences and those of their students, and utilizing them as an educational tool in and out of the classroom. To be culturally proficient also means recognizing the differences in these experiences and understanding how those differences can impact other aspects of life. A culturally proficient person is a broad thinker, a question-asker, and a compassionate citizen.

This workshop, which is 6 cumulative hours, is designed to happen over the course of 3 days, 2 hours at a time, and spread 4 weeks apart. I've modeled the structure after the real world experiences of students. Day one (titled "Admissions") encompasses discussion on aspects of a student's life that inhibits or assists their access to education. Day two (titled "Enrollment") focuses on challenges students face while they pursue a degree at a college or university. Finally, day three (titled "Graduation") examines what happens when a student leaves the higher education sphere and enters into the workforce. Much like how those events build or destroy the

foundation of a student's financial success in their adult life, this workshop follows the same structure and should further build upon participants' skills to educate equitably.

Each session includes assignments to be completed ahead of time, 2 readings and 1 assignment, which is why they are spread 4 weeks apart. Equity literacy and cultural proficiency rely on self-reflection and education, so it's important that participants do work for themselves in service of themselves, not just to complete the workshop.

Each session includes 2-3 activities that incorporates small and large group discussion. We'll get into more details on those activities in a moment.

And finally, at the end of each day, there is an action item to be completed; the learning cannot be contained to simply the workshop itself. Participants should commit to using their new found knowledge, and will be asked to do something specific and directly related to the workshop.

That overview should give you an idea about what this workshop series will look like; now, let's talk about what each day will look like. To begin, let's explore session one, "Admissions."

Participants will be asked to read an article from the Ithacan, titled "Low-income students face systemic barriers to college access," by Kayla Dwyer and the The Pell Institute For The Study Of Opportunity In Education's 2021 report on The Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States. As they are reading, participants should compile a list of things that surprise or don't surprise them from these readings, and to bring those notes for discussion during the session.

The first activity of the day will be a 30 minute discussion on the readings themselves, with the first 15 minutes reserved for smaller group discussions. The second activity consists of

working on a few student case studies over the course of 45 minutes. The first 15 minutes will consist of small groups exploring the challenges of students and families from three different financial situations. Then, each group will report their thoughts to the large group for a broader discussion and comparison of notes for the last 30 minutes.

The last 45 minutes of the day will be spent on developing a survey for participants to send to their students to get real feedback on how they are doing and how the institution helps or hinders them. Like the other two exercises, the first 15 minutes are spent on small group discussion before rounding out the day with a large group discussion. Participants are asked to send the survey to their students for this session's commitment. This also includes sending follow up reminders as well.

Now, let's take a look at session two, "Enrollment." Participants are expected to review the Poverty Fact Sheet on Financial Barriers to College Completion published by the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin Madison. The second reading is an article published by the International Council for Open and Distance Education titled "Analysis of student and faculty perceptions of textbook costs in higher education." Participants will be asked to examine course syllabi from the past academic year and list all required and optional readings - and their costs.

This session has two activities. The first is the longest activity of the workshop, lasting a total of 75 minutes. This will encompass an evaluation of the survey results. This activity is split into 3 smaller sections: a 15 minute overview of initial findings from the facilitator, a 30 minute small group discussion on that data and suggestions to address it, and the last 30 minutes are spent on a large group conversation about new ideas.

The second activity of the day is a review of syllabi and course materials. Participants will share their information they were asked to gather ahead of the session in small groups for the first 20 minutes. Then, the last 25 minutes will be spent on discussing the average cost in the room and challenges to choosing course materials that need to be considered. At the end of this session, participants are expected to commit to changing at least one of the materials in the syllabi to a more cost considerate item and will be held accountable to that change going forward.

Finally, let's take a look at the last session of this workshop, "Graduation." Ahead of this session, participants will read a survey conducted by InsideHigherEd, titled "Where the Weaknesses Are in Student Financial Wellness," as well as an article from the Washington Post, "Will that college degree pay off? A look at some of the numbers" by Jon Marcus. The pre-work for this session requires participants to reach out to (at least) two alumni for updates on what they are doing for work so that they can share those updates as a part of activity one. Sharing alumni updates will take 45 minutes, where participants will one by one share their updates with the large group, the facilitator taking notes when appropriate.

The next 45 minutes will be spent discussing the institution's alumni relations program. In small groups for 20 minutes, participants should discuss how alumni reach out to them (if at all) and the kinds of things they discuss, as well as share any resources that they know of for alumni support. In the 25 minute large group discussion, each small group will share what they talked about, what resources they know of, and what suggestions they have to support alumni - which could be on an individual, departmental, and/or institutional basis.

The very last 30 minutes of this workshop should be spent discussing any final thoughts, including lasting impressions, lingering questions, and sharing of any relevant resources. The

final commitment is for participants to reach out to the same alumni and offer support in any way they can. This could mean offering a contact to another professional, reviewing a project they need help with, or helping them reorient their professional priorities after graduation, or anything else you might have the ability to assist them with. Like the other action items, this will be communicated to their supervising team so they can be held accountable.

That was a pretty high level overview of the activities across this workshop series; now we can address the intended outcome of this workshop. After spending more than 6 hours of work with these materials, participants will be able to: (1) understand how economic inequality impacts a student's education before attending, while attending, and after graduating from their institution, (2) identify external forces that perpetuate economic inequality among college students, (3) address forces at their institution that perpetuate economic inequality (4) engage in conversations with institution leadership on those forces that perpetuate economic inequality with thoughtful questions and prepared suggestions.

Every good project is never complete, so let's take a look at some changes a facilitator could make to this workshop to suit their needs. I don't know if you've caught this, but so far in this presentation I've used the word participants. This was completely intentional. For the most part, this workshop series can be conducted with almost anyone! The readings I have put together and the activities are approachable enough that anyone in any position of higher education should be able to participate. The kinds of conversations might be different, as different positions will have different areas of knowledge, but it is also important to engage in conversations outside of one's area of expertise.

That being said, I will let you know that I designed this with the Northeastern University Department of Political Science in mind; in particular, this was made for faculty. That amounts to

around 30 participants, and I would most likely keep small groups at 3-5 people - ensuring that they are different small groups each time. How might you change this workshop to better suit a different group of participants?

When talking about syllabi, a Dean can still work on this project - they just might need to rely on finding syllabi of a particular department; their commitment might be different as well. Instead of committing to changing one of their material items like a standard faculty member might, their commitment could be to make a college-wide shift towards utilizing a particular resource.

The same can be said about university staff. For reaching out to alumni, I am sure every university staff member has interacted with at least one student - or depending on your job you might meet as many as the faculty do! Staff still have resources they can offer to alumni. This exercise is valuable for everyone.

I think that covers just about everything! I did want to mention that I have posted my powerpoint script, my powerpoint itself, and the workshop packet with a daily overview, every activity plan, and required worksheets on the thread of this post for everyone to access. Each activity plan includes time, materials, instructions, and even notes for facilitation. I also created a timeline for the facilitator that should help with keeping track of this long workshop series. Included in that packet are also a few reference pages, detailing all the resources I have used in the making of the workshop and this presentation. Finally, I want to make sure that everyone has my contact information. My email addresses are posted there; feel free to add me on LinkedIn as well. I look forward to your feedback and to exploring your presentations! Thank you for your time and your hard work on the important issues of culture, equity, power, and influence.

