STRONG START to FINISH

ML Motivate Lab

Enhancing Equity in Online Professional Development for Higher Education Instructors
Summary Report

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Introduction

Postsecondary system leaders and philanthropists have leveraged their roles as policymakers and accountability officers to bring equity to structural reforms like corequisite support and multiple measures. The commitment to equity can significantly improve completion rates for racially-minoritized students in developmental education and gateway courses. Unfortunately, there is little clarity on how institutional and system leaders can effectively support the reform of curricular and instructional practices at scale. Adapting evidence-based instructional reforms through online professional development provides one potential pathway to synthesizing the high-level policy work of system leaders with grassroots efforts in developmental education and gateway courses.

To this end, Motivate Lab has partnered with several state higher education systems to drive online equitable and motivationally supportive environments. These include the City University of New York, the University System of Georgia, The College System of Tennessee, the Oregon Community College System, the Ohio Department of Education, and the California State System. Through these partnerships, Motivate Lab deployed its signature digital learning tool with over 1,000 faculty. This tool, the Motivating Learners Course (MLC), is a predominately asynchronous course that introduces instructors to the basic ideas behind learning mindsets and associated practices. Learning mindsets are a person's beliefs about learning and school that can profoundly impact their academic trajectory. The two-course sequence equips faculty to start their courses with motivationally supportive tools and language. In particular, participants learn about three key learning mindsets—Growth Mindset, Purpose & Relevance, and Sense of Belonging. Rather than "fixing" students by making them "grittier," the primary goal of this course is to target changes in the learning context as a more sustainable model for cultivating equitable and motivating learning environments.

In the initial design of the course, Motivate Lab partnered with practitioners and a few equity experts to help integrate equity principles and language into our course. This initial version of the course has received overwhelmingly positive feedback from participants. However, our internal analysis and commitment to continuous improvement identified a need for deeper integration of equity, culturally relevant pedagogy, and social justice principles in the course.

Scope of Work

With financial support from *Strong Start to Finish,* Motivate Lab retained Justice, Equity, Diversity (JEDI) and higher-ed consultant, Dr. Jacqueline Taylor, to conduct a comprehensive equity review of the MLC. Dr. Taylor's review focused on 1) how Motivate Lab might integrate equity into the MLC for higher education faculty and 2) how Motivate Lab might adapt the initial design of the MLC for postsecondary advising practitioners. Joint funding from *Strong Start to Finish* and *The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation* allowed Dr. Taylor to conduct a more extensive equity review of the course. The equity review entailed a review of the

current version of the MLC, Motivate Lab's equity definition and framework, and a written evaluation report. This document highlights the results of Dr. Taylor's evaluation report. It will guide the design and customization of new modules focused on equity, culturally relevant pedagogy, and equitable-minded instructional practices.

Motivate Lab's focus on equity centers on deconstructing systemic educational and institutional practices that create inequitable outcomes, often based on race and socioeconomic status. This project reflects Motivate Lab's equity journey and commitment to "walk our equity talk." We thank Strong Start to Finish and Dr. Taylor for helping us continually improve how we approach equity in our work.

Methodology

The equity review occurred during the Spring 2022 semester. Steps of the review process included:

Step 1: Orient Dr. Taylor to the scope and content of the current MLC

Step 2: Participate in a "mock run" and review of the existing Motivating Learners Course

Step 3: Complete Review Sheet #1 and Review Sheet #2

Step 4: Advise on specific equity integration recommendations

Step 5: Advise on equity-focused performance tasks and discussion questions

Step 6: Submit evaluation report

Step 7: Participate in Debrief Meeting

Key Findings

Dr. Taylor's full report can be found here. Although aspects of Dr. Taylor's report focused on how Motivate Lab may adapt the MLC for the postsecondary advising context, Motivate Lab has mainly concentrated on Dr. Taylor's recommendations regarding equity, culturally relevant pedagogy, and social justice for this project. Below is a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis of the high-level findings from the equity review.

Figure 1. *SWOT analysis of the high-level findings from the equity review*

S W O T

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
1. Course design and aesthetics 2. Mindset GPS Framework 3. Accessible, evidenced-based resources 4. Usage of student voice helps Mindset GPS stick	1. Deficit, condescending, and race-neutral language 2. Lacks common language, glossary of terms or lexicon 3. Lacks references to Culturally Responsive teaching thought leaders e.g. Zaretta Hammond, Geneva Gay, or Gloria Ladson-Biillings 4. Whiteness presented as the norm in videos, imagery, examples, and activities	1. Add a separate Equity Module to frame the course 2. Leverage Center for Urban Education's *Six Equity-Minded Principles* to embed equity principles throughout the course 3. Deconstruct whiteness as the norm in videos, images, activities. 4. Enhance Student Voice with actual students, in their own voice and language 5. Embed equity-minded language in all GPS messaging and performance tasks 6. Tailor design for faculty in The Choir and The Allies to instigate, accelerate and sustain JEDI initiatives 7. Prompt practitioners to utilize data to promote culture of evidence 8. Incorporate certification or badging system for course completers.	1. Policies designed to undermine equity, culturally relevant pedagogy, and social justice principles 2. Emphasizing professional development without an interrogation of student data

The equity consultant affirms:

1. Equity work is a journey, not a destination. The journey is both dynamic and people-focused. It is evident the internal work at Motivate Lab encourages the continuous improvement and periodic review of its premier digital learning tool, the MLC.
2. Motivate Lab offers an innovative Mindset GPS framework based on motivation and student development theory.
3. The course design allows for discussion with colleagues in ways that can further dialogue around learning mindsets and equity.
4. *The evidence-based resources provided at the end of each section and the .pdf handouts that can be used for reference and continuous improvement around learning mindsets are beneficial.*

The equity consultant commends:

1. The metaphorical design for the MLC as a "journey" is appealing. Everyone is familiar with GPS as a term that takes you from point A to point B.
2. Student Voice (*Reggie's and Gabriella's Story*) is a helpful strategy for making the learning mindsets stick; however, the course should include additional non-stereotypical demographic information of each student profile.
3. The brief introduction to equity is a helpful strategy for grounding learning mindsets in ways that begin to help practitioners consider students' individual and collective needs.

Recommendations

Five overarching themes and focus areas emerged from the equity review:

1. Conceptualizing equity
2. Establishing common vocabulary and anti-deficit language
3. Deconstructing whiteness
4. Integrating student voice
5. Leveraging Data as an equity-minded practice

The following sections discuss each of the five themes. Specific course instances highlighted by Dr. Taylor are presented in support of the recommendations.

Conceptualizing Equity. For this project, Motivate Lab retained Dr. Jacqueline Taylor to conduct a comprehensive equity review of the MLC. Dr. Taylor's review focused on how Motivate Lab might conceptualize and integrate equity into the MLC for higher-ed faculty. Of particular focus is whether the course should include a stand-alone equity module, or is equity better addressed by integrating equity-minded principles throughout the course? Both approaches have merit, as well as design and participant engagement implications.

Dr. Taylor recommended the MLC include a separate equity module at the beginning of the course. Further, Motivate Lab's equity definition should serve as a foundational element to help course participants better understand how Motivate Lab centers on those historically underserved and/or systemically marginalized. The consultant also noted the course would likely resonate with practitioners as a call to action. Therefore, a dedicated section focused on equity is a helpful strategy for grounding learning mindsets. This approach encourages practitioners to consider the individual and collective needs of the students they serve. Finally, the consultant put forth the Center for Urban Education's resource on equity-mindedness as an exemplar and starting point to conceptualize equity in the course.

Establishing common vocabulary and anti-deficit language. Dr. Taylor's equity review identified various challenges in the usage of language. First, the lack of clearly defined terms or a lexicon to help practitioners conceptualize equity is a challenge to the course. Dr. Taylor noted that many practitioners desire to serve students equitably but lack a clear understanding of asset-based and deficit thinking, implicit bias, microaggressions, and the differences between equality, equity, and justice. Practitioners can also benefit from learning how to integrate culturally responsive practices and what it means to be a justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion (JEDI) advocate in their practice. An understanding of these terms is necessary for attitudinal change. Dr. Taylor offered Achieving the Dream's Equity Statement as an exemplar to develop key terms and a lexicon for equity.

Secondly, the equity review revealed instances of deficit, condescending, and race-neutral language. An example of deficit language appears in *Section 2.2, Adopting an Equity Frame for Supporting Student Motivation*.

Figure 2. *An example of deficit language in the Motivating Learners Course*

"*Reggie entered college with worries about whether he would feel like he belonged in college and doubts about his academic preparation and potential. He is highly respectful of teachers, and also worried about whether his professors will see him as a student who is worthy of their time and attention. His worries make him vigilant in looking for messaging that confirms his worries, and he is hesitant to reach out for help because he fears that asking for help will confirm that others see him as a student who does not have what it takes to succeed.*"

You might recall that we asked you to consider what kind of mindset supportive messages would be particularly helpful to send them before making the orientation video of your course. **The point of that exercise was to help you see how students from different backgrounds, with different knowledge about college, and different learning mindsets, might need different mindset support and different messaging.** In this lesson, we offer a different scenario for you to consider: What if we told you that Reggie had concerns about confirming negative stereotypes related to being a student of color, and that these concerns contributed to his vigilance and anxiety, making him fearful of failing courses, particularly in his chosen major of engineering?

Dr. Taylor recommended Motivate Lab replace the word "different" with "diverse." The term "different" implies an inferior difference and potentially "others" students from diverse backgrounds, which is deficit thinking and mindset.

Deconstructing whiteness. The equity review revealed the need to deconstruct whiteness as the norm in MLC videos, imagery, and activities. For example, Motivate Lab created a "Virtual Gallery Walk" that contains five orientation videos. The equity consultant recommended Motivate Lab diversify its videos as a first step. Dr. Taylor asked, "Where are the black and brown men?" Where are the Native American professors? How does Mindset GPS intersect with JEDI?" In addition, Dr. Taylor noted Motivate Lab should consider incorporating mindset quotes by diverse thought leaders and researchers to provide diverse perspectives that

further decenter whiteness. References to culturally responsive thought leaders such as African American female authors Zaretta Hammond, Geneva Gay, and Gloria Ladson-Billings will enhance the course.

Dr. Taylor also commented on the usage of "Reggie's *Story"* in *Section 2.10, "Leveraging Student Perspectives: Revisiting Reggie." Reggie's Story* helps course participants consider how students' interpretation of learning is built on an instructor's learning mindset, messaging, and instructional practices. A white male narrates *Reggie's Story*. There is no context for Reggie's background, culture, race, ethnicity, community, or academic preparation. This limits practitioners' ability to identify what aspect of the Mindset GPS framework to leverage. Further, not establishing Reggie's race or ethnicity is race-neutral language and is problematic from an equity perspective.

Student Voice. The equity consultant commended Motivate Lab's integration of student voice. In addition to *Reggie's Story*, *Gabriella's Story* was also introduced to help practitioners consider student perspectives. A white male also narrates *Gabriella's Story*. The equity consultant recommended students tell their own stories in their voices.

Further, a novel feature to consider is offering various student profiles from which participants may choose based on their specific context. Therefore, Motivate Lab should consider creating diverse student profiles. In addition, diverse names should be used, e.g., Kawhi, Cheyenne, Yu, Stephanie, Mark, Treasure, Kalo, Estela, Haven, Denali, Dakota, Sequoia, and Mandeep.

Leveraging Data. Practitioners need to apply the Mindset GPS framework from a culture of evidence. An equity-minded practitioner interrogates their student data and understands where equity gaps exist. As an equity-minded practice, the MLC should prompt practitioners look at student data (disaggregated, qualitative, and quantitative). The course should encourage practitioners to leverage student data to continue motivational planning and applying the Mindset GPS framework.

Implications for Professional Development and the Higher Education Field

Based on the findings presented in this report, Motivate Lab shares three considerations for the higher education field.

Identify and focus on the *coalition of the willing* with The Choir and The Allies. This recommendation derives from the *Taxonomy of Faculty Perspectives on Teaching Men of Color* (Harris & Wood, 2015). The taxonomy of educators' perspectives presents four categories: 1) The Choir, 2) The Allies, 3) The Resisters, and 4) The Defiant. The Choir are

educators who acknowledge there are historically underserved and underrepresented student populations and are willing to employ practices that will foster their success. The Allies are educators unaware of the obstacles traditionally underserved students face in academic settings. The Allies have not developed the competencies necessary to serve students equitably but are willing to learn. Contrarily, The Resisters are educators who are unaware of the challenges some students face and are unwilling to employ practices to aid their success.

Interestingly, Harris and Wood distinguish The Resisters as either passive or active. The Passive Resisters can be encouraged to join The Choir and The Allies (*the coalition of the willing*) with direct and intrusive practices and extrinsic motivation. The Active Resisters, on the other hand, closely align with The Defiant. The Defiant are educators who admit to knowing the realities of disproportionate impact and disparities for some students but are still unwilling to help aid their success (Harris & Wood, 2015).

This conceptual framework is more broadly instructive for Motivate Lab, professional developers, and the higher education field. First, practitioners can utilize the taxonomy to understand the "types" of educators. Secondly, buy-in and a sense of urgency from campus leadership and faculty are essential practices for curricular reform and achieving equitable outcomes in developmental education and gateway courses. Therefore, online professional development is more meaningful if the focus is on building a *coalition of the willing* with The Choir and The Allies, rather than the futile attempt to convert those unwilling to engage (The Active Resisters and The Defiant). According to the taxonomy, the goal of engaging The Choir and The Allies is to empower and educate. Thus, instructional designers should design professional development that allows practitioners to explore deeper, make meaning in community with others, and evoke self-reflection before (re)action. Establishing a common vocabulary, clearly defining terms, or providing a lexicon at the onset is a straightforward strategy to empower and educate higher-ed practitioners.

Recognize and Respect Diversity Fatigue. Equity initiatives can backfire. Many equity practitioners experience diversity burnout, battle fatigue, racial battle fatigue, or diversity fatigue. As conceptualized by Smith, McPartlan, Poe & Thoman (2021), diversity fatigue is "*a construct used to understand feelings of weariness toward justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts.*" A myriad of equity initiatives, programming, and policies are happening nationwide to improve students' experiences and outcomes in corequisite education. Shifting cultures steeped in white supremacy and actualizing more equitable teaching and learning spaces requires hard work, political savvy, and access to direct and creative resources.

Most importantly, cultural shifts and system change require extraordinary buy-in and courageous leadership. All too often, "diversity work" falls on the shoulders of the historically marginalized and underserved who view diversity work as a calling rather than a strategic

initiative or talking point. Further, diversity fatigue can be particularly salient for those in The Choir and The Allies. They are the first to seek out equity-related professional development like the MLC. Many in the *coalition of the willing* are disheartened and frustrated at the glacier pace of the process.

In light of the above recommendation to engage The Choir and The Allies, Motivate Lab would be remiss not to prompt professional development agencies and philanthropists to acknowledge and anticipate diversity fatigue. To address fatigue, we encourage higher education leaders to be thoughtful and catalyze supplemental resources such as stipends, release time, recognition, etc., to reduce the cost associated with equity and professional development work.

Navigating Political and Power Dynamics. Equity practitioners acknowledge differences between systems, institutions, and learning contexts. Local, state, and national political and power dynamics can profoundly impact how, or if, equity, culturally relevant pedagogy, and social justice principles are permitted and integrated into curricular reforms. The nature and magnitude of these differences may not be known or evident at the onset of a partnership. To better understand these dynamics, Motivate Lab employs an established research design process that involves empathizing and learning with stakeholders, synthesizing and planning the following steps, prototyping and testing solutions, and adopting and infusing (or scaling) effective practices. This process has proven successful for collective sense-making with each of Motivate Lab's partners. To this end, practitioners should take the time to empathize, learn, and closely examine political discourse before identifying professional development and interventions promoting equity. Questions to consider are:

1. What political discourse surrounds statewide or institutional policies promoting equity?
2. Is there an existing *coalition of the willing* among leadership, faculty, or staff with the capacity, commitment, and urgency to name and promote equity?
3. Are there existing initiatives (system-level, campus-level, discipline-level) that external agencies can leverage or "plug into" to accelerate equity initiatives?
4. How do individual institutions or systems operationalize developmental or corequisite education policies?
5. What does the system-level or institutional data reveal about corequisite implementation and student outcomes?
6. What factors do administrators, staff, instructors, and students attribute to inequitable developmental or corequisite education outcomes?

Unfortunately, there are learning contexts and individuals resistant to conversations about justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts. In these environments, equity work will likely result in performative measures such as checking the professional development box on the

JEDI checklist rather than evoking a critical interrogation of systems, student data, faculty learning mindsets, and instructional practices. The implication of performative equity is just as dangerous as doing nothing or maintaining the status quo. The above questions are offered to help postsecondary system leaders, philanthropists, and the professional development field determine the best use of their time, energy, and funding.

Next Steps

The course revision process is currently underway. Motivate Lab will complete as many revisions as possible by August 2022, recognizing some aspects of the course – e.g., development of the equity module and recording student videos – will take longer to revise. After completing the redesign, we will also update the course description and its marketing materials. Because equity is a journey rather than a destination, we will continue to engage equity consultants annually to ensure our course continues to improve on the equity front.

With nearly 1000 faculty participating in the course and counting, Motivate Lab will focus on:
1. A high-quality learning experience for instructors.
2. Strategic support for the high-fidelity implementation of changes in teaching practices.
3. Faculty-led approaches for creating culture change sensitive to institutional and system parameters.

Given the potential for Motivate Lab to scale this course to its existing higher education partners, the potential to disseminate learnings from this project beyond internal dissemination and Strong Start to Finish is enormous.