

Lane County Equity Lens: Analysis and Recommendations



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Prepared by: Lindsay Cook, Mariah Mulcahy, Maya Noviski

Oregon Policy Lab
Institute for Policy Research and Engagement

School of Planning, Public Policy, and Management
1209 University of Oregon
Eugene, Oregon 97403-1209



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The Institute for Policy Research and Engagement (IPRE) is a research center affiliated with the School of Planning, Public Policy, and Management at the University of Oregon. It is an interdisciplinary organization that assists Oregon communities by providing planning and technical assistance to help solve local issues and improve the quality of life for Oregon residents. The role of IPRE is to link the skills, expertise, and innovation of higher education with the transportation, economic development, and environmental needs of communities and regions in the State of Oregon, thereby providing service to Oregon and learning opportunities to the students involved.

About the UO – Lane County Policy Lab

The University of Oregon's School of Planning, Public Policy and Management and the government of Lane County started a partnership in 2018 to provide applied learning experiences for students, applied research settings for faculty and staff, and technical assistance to the Lane County government.

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Land Acknowledgement

The University of Oregon is located on Kalapuya Ilihi, the traditional indigenous homeland of the Kalapuya people. Following treaties between 1851 and 1855, Kalapuya people were dispossessed of their indigenous homeland by the United States government and forcibly removed to the Coast Reservation in Western Oregon. Today, descendants are citizens of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde Community of Oregon and the Confederated Tribes of the Siletz Indians of Oregon, and continue to make important contributions in their communities, at UO, and across the land we now refer to as Oregon.

IPRE operations and projects take place at various locations in Oregon, and wishes to acknowledge and express our respect for the traditional homelands of all of the indigenous people of Oregon. This includes the Burns Paiute Tribe, the Confederated Tribes of the Coos, Lower Umpqua and Siuslaw Indians, the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde Community of Oregon, the Confederated Tribes of Siletz Indians of Oregon, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation, the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs, the Coquille Indian Tribe, the Cow Creek Band of Umpqua Tribe of Indians, and the Klamath Tribes. We also express our respect for all other displaced Indigenous peoples who call Oregon home.

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Executive Summary

Prior to elaborating on our findings, please note the COVID-19 pandemic impeded the collection data. This impaired our ability to make conclusive inferences concerning factors enhancing and inhibiting equity in local government. Our findings convey approaches and limitations currently impacting equity in local government. Despite these limitations, we were able to conduct interviews with three equity leaders in local government: Benjamin Duncan the Chief, Diversity and Equity Officer of Multnomah County; Dr. Farris Muhammad, the Chief, Diversity and Inclusion Officer for the City of Peoria; and Mo Young, the Equity and Access Coordinator for Lane County. The interviews, along with a literature review on the cultivation of equity in government, provided insight useful to Lane County in their implementation of equity as a strategic lens.

Summary of Key Findings

Our research yielded six themes relevant to equity in local government. The themes include the definition of equity, staffing, professional titles, budget, measuring equity, and community engagement.

Equity: Equity is defined similarly by the three equity leaders. Their definitions incorporate enhancing residents' access to opportunities and improving residents' quality of life. Although equity often encompasses protected classes, equity leaders employ the Government Alliance for Race and Equity framework which emphasizes racial equity.

Staffing: Staffing levels vary across the three equity offices and affect the prioritization of equity work.

Professional Titles: Two of the three equity leaders' titles are "Chief" of their department, which denote the equity programs' legitimacy and the equity leaders' responsibility and/or authority.

Budget: Only one equity program is funded by independent budgetary line-item and reported having adequate funding. The remaining equity programs are funded under over-arching line-items and reported being insufficiently funded.

Measuring Equity and Community Engagement: Community engagement was identified as an area for improvement for all three equity programs.

Although our research did not generate definitive findings, it highlights how the structure of an equity program can impact its efficacy. Equity programs with limited resources do more with less, which is often not sustainable. We encourage Lane County to consider increasing the number of staff responsible for equity work, evaluate the allocation of Lane County's budget and creating more opportunities for residents to participate in and contribute to equity work in Lane County.

Introduction

Lane County’s organizational priorities, as identified by the County Commissioners, include implementing equity as a guiding lens to build awareness, consistency, and intentionality when evaluating the implementation of strategies to better achieve the County’s mission and goals. These aspirations, put forth by the strategic plan, indicate the safety, health, and vibrancy of residents living in the incorporated communities are of primary concern for the administration. Equity, which is defined by the county as everyone having access to the opportunities necessary to satisfy essential needs, advance their well-being, and achieve their full potential regardless of age, education, ethnicity, language, income, physical limitations, or geographic barriers, is an important tenet of fostering community. By recognizing where progress must be made to ensure every resident feels represented and can achieve said goals, the county can better fulfill its vision of being the best county to live, work, and play. Drawing on published literature, an example of a successful community-oriented approach, and first-hand accounts of equity in local governments across the nation, several recommendations have been identified to help direct Lane County as it applies an equity lens to current internal and external systems for a more inclusive and colorful future.

Literature Review

Cultivating and practicing equity in government is critical for assuring the perspectives and needs of all citizens, especially underrepresented groups, are represented. However, equity programs and initiatives are often impeded by significant barriers and challenges. To further understand the context of equity in government this paper explores existing hiring and promotional trends in government, government strategies for implementing equity, and enhancing equity through citizen participation in programs and initiatives.

Among all levels of government, equity has been a focal point for researchers and administrators alike. In looking at federal hiring and promotional practices, Riccucci (2009) contributed to the literature by observing that over a 22-year time span, white men still dominated a majority of the most senior posts. Furthermore, white women and men made up 85 percent of the highest ranks of government while men and women of color continued to be woefully underrepresented, demonstrating relatively little racial or ethnic diversity during the analyzed timeframe (Riccucci, 2009). This is notable because not only is a diverse workforce more representative of the general population, but people from different backgrounds tend to perceive issues and address problems based on their lived experiences. In the article *Racial Integration of Local Government Leadership in Southern Small Cities: Consequences for Equity Relevance and Political Relevance*, Scavo (1990) discusses how those who are a part of the policy formulation process are often reflected in the public policies themselves. Furthermore, in local government where administrators and officials more directly represent the communities, Scavo (1990) argues that not only do officials of color serve as role models to community members who can identify with them, but “black representation in political and

administrative sectors is dependent on the types of issues that local governments address” (p. 364).

The notion that diversity influences the equality of opportunity for different racial groups is precisely why achieving equity in government and in the administration of public programs is so imperative. However, according to Holley (2016), this can only occur as a result of a critical and multi-faceted strategy. He argues equity is achieved through the tenets of “embracing the gifts of diversity; realizing the role of race, power, and injustice; radical hospitality; trust-building and commitment; honoring dissent and embracing protest; and adaptability to community change” (2016, p. 23). These principles cannot be implemented in isolation; in order to achieve the objective of one, another must be acknowledged and thoroughly considered (Holley, 2016). This is because communities are comprised of people with different backgrounds, histories, experiences, perspectives, and needs. Equity can only be attained when residents have an authentic role and opportunity to shape their community, which is greatly impacted by the structure of the local government.

A key example of local government creating and implementing an inclusive attempt at building equity can be seen through the City of Seattle’s Race and Social Justice Initiative (RSJI). When first designed in 2004, Seattle was the first municipality in the United States to undertake an effort focusing explicitly on institutional racism (Race and Social Justice Initiative, n.d.). To begin, RSJI focused on Seattle’s internal programs and operations by developing a common language to address institutional racism. In addition, various tools and trainings were designed to bring a racial equity lens to public sector work (Race and Social Justice Initiative, n.d.). As the initiative became more deeply rooted, it partnered with other institutions and the community. For example, in developing their 2015-2017 strategic plan, RSJI staff conducted 37 listening sessions with city employees and community members to learn which issues were most pressing and how RSJI could help address them (Race and Social Justice Initiative, n.d.). From these conversations, RSJI’s strategies emerged and once drafted, the plan was disseminated to the community and feedback was welcomed and encouraged. In respecting the communities wishes, RSJI strives to hold the city government accountable while increasing community capacity to do this work instead of implementing a top-down approach (Race and Social Justice Initiative, n.d.).

While the top-down model of governance may seem efficient, it could be a significant impediment to facilitating equity and civic engagement because it does not engender inclusion. Since equity can only be achieved through leaders connecting with and understanding the needs of community members, as exemplified in Seattle, Holley suggests including residents as “partners” in the decision-making process (2016, p. 17). Such a partnership removes physical and social barriers inhibiting residents’ participation in civic engagement and assures the preferences of the community are represented. Strategies focusing on building equity in a meaningful way require honest evaluations of internal functions and must be committed to encouraging and supporting external input from community members. In doing so, amendments to the current structure will enable the continuation of building better representative bodies that uplift and act in the best interest of all residents.

Methodology

In attempting to understand how local governments address and prioritize equity, our group interviewed three public managers working in equity divisions across the country. To begin, our team met with Mo Young, the Equity and Access Coordinator for Lane County, who gave us an overview of the history of equity initiatives in Lane County, explained her responsibilities, and shared a draft of Lane County's Racial Equity Action Plan. After learning about Young's experiences and the areas in which Lane County's equity lens could be expanded, we created a list of ten interview questions to help shape our understanding of equity practices in local government. Once we finalized our list of questions, we attempted to contact public managers in cities with robust equity initiatives to develop suggestions that Lane County could include in its strategic plan. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19, many public managers were unavailable and could not be interviewed. However, Benjamin Duncan, the Chief Diversity and Equity Officer for Multnomah County, Dr. Farris Muhammad, the Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer for the City of Peoria, IL, and Mo Young, the Equity and Access Coordinator for Lane County agreed to share their experiences with us. Each group member interviewed one person and the conversations ranged from thirty minutes to one hour. Every interview was conducted over Zoom.

In order to build a deeper understanding of how equity is approached in these three areas, we asked our interviewees a set of ten predetermined questions, which can be found in Appendix A. A summary of each interview can be found in Appendix B. Once the interviews were complete and responses recorded, our group began analyzing the data for similarities and differences in each locality's initiatives. Through this process, our team came up with a set of three recommendations that Lane County can implement in its strategic plan to help improve the effectiveness and depth of its equity initiatives. As noted previously, due to these unprecedented times, our team conducted fewer interviews than expected leading to limitations in the breadth of our data collection. In addition, it must be acknowledged that Lane County, Multnomah County, and Peoria are all very different geographical areas leading to a wide variance in responses. Lastly, each team member interviewed one public manager which could have led to possible interview bias in the responses. However, we are confident that the recommendations we are providing are still salient and appropriate for Lane County.

Themes

Between May 5th and May 18th, three separate interviews were conducted with equity leaders from Multnomah County, Lane County and Peoria. Although the size and demographics of these localities vary, all three government leaders were asked the same ten interview questions. After the completion of the interviews, the leaders' responses were synthesized to identify underlying themes. Overall, we found the localities' equity initiatives to be similar and identified six primary themes. The themes are described in the following paragraphs.

Definition of Equity

The definition of equity was universally the same within the three localities. Each equity leader referenced enhancing access to opportunities and improving community members' quality of life in their definitions of equity. In addition, all three localities use the Government Alliance for Race and Equity model in their equity programs, which emphasizes the importance of racial equity as a starting point for pursuing equity in society.

Staffing

The primary differentiating factor between localities is Multnomah County has a dedicated staff of nine equity personnel, whereas Lane County and Peoria have one dedicated staff member. Both equity leaders conveyed they fulfill multiple roles, including mitigating inequity in systematic contexts and organizational structures. Prioritization of tasking is situation dependent. In Multnomah County, equity work is delegated amongst the staff, which allows the county's equity work to be shared and thus prioritized. Additionally, Lane County and Peoria's equity positions were created within the last six years and have only had one incumbent.

Professional Titles

Multnomah County and Peoria's equity leaders are designated as Chief, Diversity and Equity or Diversity and Inclusion Officers. However, Lane County's equity leader is designated as an Equity Access Coordinator. The designation of chief of a department denotes more autonomy, authority, and responsibility than a coordinator.

Budget

Lane County and Peoria's equity leaders do not have a dedicated budget or line item on the localities' budget. Funding for equity program is provided under another department's line item. In Lane County, equity funds come from the county's "general fund" and Peoria's equity funds are under the "diversity" fund. Both Lane County and Peoria equity leaders conveyed current funding levels are limited. Multnomah County's equity program has a dedicated staff and has sufficient funding to fulfill its missions.

Measuring Equity

All equity leaders agreed it is difficult to measure equity, but highlighted the importance of intentionality when funding programs, holding training, and creating opportunities. In such situations, localities may consider how the allocation of funding benefits or disadvantages community members.

Community Engagement

Peoria's equity leader is the community's direct line of communication with the city. Residents are accustomed to and expect frequent communication with the city.

However, Multnomah County and Lane County conveyed direct engagement with residents is an area for improvement. Currently, these localities have limited public equity programs and initiatives.

Significance of Themes

Each of the themes represents a different aspect of facilitating equity in local government. While there are a few distinct differences between Multnomah County, Lane County and Peoria, most of the identified themes impact equity leaders' ability to serve their community. From these themes, we have generated recommendations on how to bolster Lane County's equity program.

Recommendations

Garnering lessons learned from relevant literature and our conversations with public managers, we have created a list of recommendations that are intended to aid Lane County in improving equity in the local government and community. These include:

- Increasing the number of staff responsible for executing equity within Lane County
- Diversifying the budget committee
- Developing metrics allowing Lane County to keep a track record of decisions, ultimately leading to enhanced social awareness
- Increasing resident involvement

Lane County should consider expanding the number of staff responsible for equity initiatives so that the Equity and Access Coordinator will have the ability to focus on completing significant work at a structural and organizational level. This recommendation also includes each department having an equity officer as an expert in their field to ensure efficiency and the productivity of equity work. While it is possible that hiring new individuals to expand Lane County's equity initiatives is not feasible, there may be opportunity to modify the current department head roles to include equity work. The intention of this recommendation is to facilitate change within every department and provide experts the tools they need to disbar inequities within local government.

Another consideration involves diversifying the budget committee and analyzing how the budget process itself can be more equitable. One way to do this is to consider how budgetary decisions affect groups of residents differently and record who is advantaged or disadvantaged by these decisions. A way for Lane County to achieve this is through creation of evaluation metrics, allowing the decision makers to openly see who is both positively and negatively affected. The importance of this recommendation is awareness and cognizance of community needs. Diversifying the budget committee and developing a set of metrics offers an array of perspectives that will ultimately lead to decisions benefitting all of Lane County's residents.

Finally, improving community and resident involvement in certain decision-making processes and equity initiatives will lead to a more community-oriented equity lens. To

achieve greater community involvement, we recommend evaluating Lane County organizations that are current equity advocates. Additionally, it may be important to analyze who is serving on community boards and if the ways in which they are structured allow for a diverse group of community members to participate.

Final Thoughts

Our research indicates equity greatly impacts residents' access to opportunities and quality of life. For this reason, equity in local government cannot be optional and should be prioritized to assure the perspectives of all residents are considered. Incorporating equity into local government is not a static process with a finite end. Equity is achieved through purposefully contemplating who benefits from the allocation of resources and policy decisions.

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Appendix A – Interview Questions

- 1) Please tell me about your city/region.
- 2) Please tell me about your role/position
- 3) How does your region/city define equity?
- 4) Do you have an equity budget? If so, is the funding allocated sufficient for the missions/objectives of the equity program?
- 5) What are the greatest equity concerns and challenges in your city/region?
- 6) How has your city/region prioritized equity?
- 7) Please tell me about your city/region's equity initiatives. What prompted the creation of these initiatives?
- 8) How has the city/region's prioritization of equity impacted the community?
- 9) How does your city/region quantify/measure the impact of equity initiatives? How do you know they are working and/or making a difference?
- 10) How does your city/region's leadership engage community members? Are community members part of the decision-making process? If so, how?

Appendix B – Interview Summaries

Benjamin Duncan

On May 15th, 2020, Mariah Mulcahy conducted an interview with Benjamin Duncan, the Chief, Diversity and Equity Officer of Multnomah County, that lasted just over an hour. Multnomah County is the smallest county in the state, yet has the biggest population, largest county staff, and greatest diversity within the county staff. Duncan serves four-year terms, and reports to the County Chair. Duncan loosely defined equity as providing resources to individuals, which is prioritized by leading with race. Considering his department has nine full time employees, The Office of Diversity and Equity has the ability to address institutionalized systems of exclusion and inequity. His staff began this process by evaluating Multnomah County and how governmental departments could improve potentially problematic behaviors. Duncan stressed that covert racism is challenging to overcome but by deepening our understanding of race and privilege, as a society we can strive to shift social norms and expand organizational learning.

Dr. Farris Muhammad

On May 18th, 2020, Lindsay Cook conducted a 45-minute interview with Dr. Farris Muhammad, the Chief, Diversity and Inclusion Officer for the City of Peoria. He is the first person to hold this position since its creation in 2018. As the only municipal employee solely dedicated to facilitating diversity and inclusion, he challenges the status quo by actively working with internal and external publics on matters affecting Peoria residents' quality of life. Dr. Muhammad shared Peoria was once recognized as the worst place in the United States for African Americans to live. Effects of systemic racism, such as redlining and lack of diversity in the city's workforce, are still prevalent. During the interview, Dr. Muhammad conveyed mitigating and changing inequitable processes requires intentionality. In the City of Peoria intentionality looks like engaging the community and being responsive to their needs, awarding minority owned and operated businesses with city contracts, modifying municipal job descriptions in ways that are relevant to residents, and establishing metrics for measuring equity throughout city departments.

Mo Young

On May 5, 2020, Maya Noviski conducted a one-hour interview with Mo Young, the Equity and Access Coordinator for Lane County. Young began by describing Lane County including information about its demographics and budgetary procedures. She explained that Lane County's definition of equity is ensuring that everyone has what they need in order to have access to the best life possible. Out of this definition, race became the primary lens in which equity is viewed because controlling for all other factors, it is still the biggest determinant of quality of life. Currently, Lane County's biggest equity challenges involve housing, access to services outside of the metro area, lack of transportation, and the rise of white nationalism. Unfortunately, the equity budget is

quite small meaning that Young wears many hats, doing both internal and external work, and every issue cannot be adequately addressed due to lack of resources. However, the fact that money is allocated from general funds is an indication that equity is important to Lane County. Young highlighted the budget committee could be more diverse and the budget process itself more equitable. Lastly, Young noted that while there are community advisory boards, community participation in decision making processes could be expanded and board member diversity improved.