Using *Design for Equity in Higher Education* for Liberatory Change: A Guide for Practice

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Introduction

The **Design for Equity in Higher Education** report recently published by the Pullias Center for Higher Education contributes to the conceptualization of liberatory design thinking in organizational contexts such as higher education by integrating policymaking explicitly into the liberatory design thinking model and locating equity-minded practice as underlying the entire process. Our revised model for postsecondary settings modifies it as such: organize, empathize, redefine, ideate, choose, prototype, buy-in, and test. It also includes equity mindsets, including practices related to noticing and reflecting throughout. In that report, two case studies (one community college and one four-year regional institution) presented the way campuses navigated the liberatory design process at each of these phases.

To facilitate the implementation of the Design for Equity in Higher Education model, we have created this toolkit to help design teams engage in this process. Therefore, for each phase of the model, we provide a short description and offer some questions and suggestions to guide practice. Based on the work of Anaissie and colleagues (2020), we also identify one or two liberatory mindsets that we found particularly relevant for facilitating equity-minded practice in each phase. At the end of the guide, we provide a list of additional resources that can help design teams learn more about design thinking and liberatory design thinking.

Design for Equity in Higher Education

Figure 1 presents the Design for Equity in Higher Education (DEHE) model, which extends and refines design thinking and liberatory design in a number of ways. For each phase, we provide a description of the purpose of the phase, including how it is shaped by the higher education context. We follow the description with some sample questions to guide practice, and we identify one or two liberatory mindsets that can be particularly beneficial for ensuring that work conducted in this phase reflects equity in the team process and contributes to greater equity in newly designed policies, programs, and practices.

The language we use reflects the political and organizational nature of higher education and a liberatory mindset. We refer to the people participating in the design team as *designers* and the people for whom they are designing — who may be faculty, staff, and/or students — as *colleagues*. We use the term *key stakeholders* to refer to individuals and groups external to the design team who may play a role in the decision-making and implementation process; these individuals may include the college president, provost, deans, department chairs, union president, and faculty senate chair and groups include the faculty senate, the union, a college or division, faculty, and staff, as well as subgroups like non-tenure-track faculty, departments, part-time staff, etc.
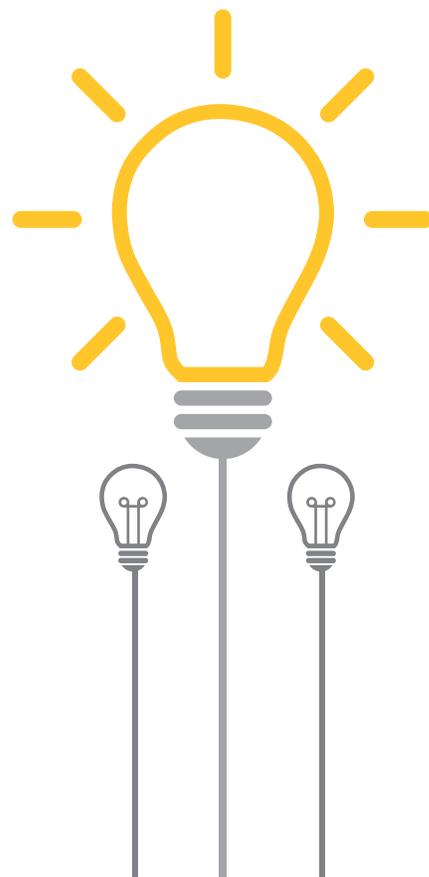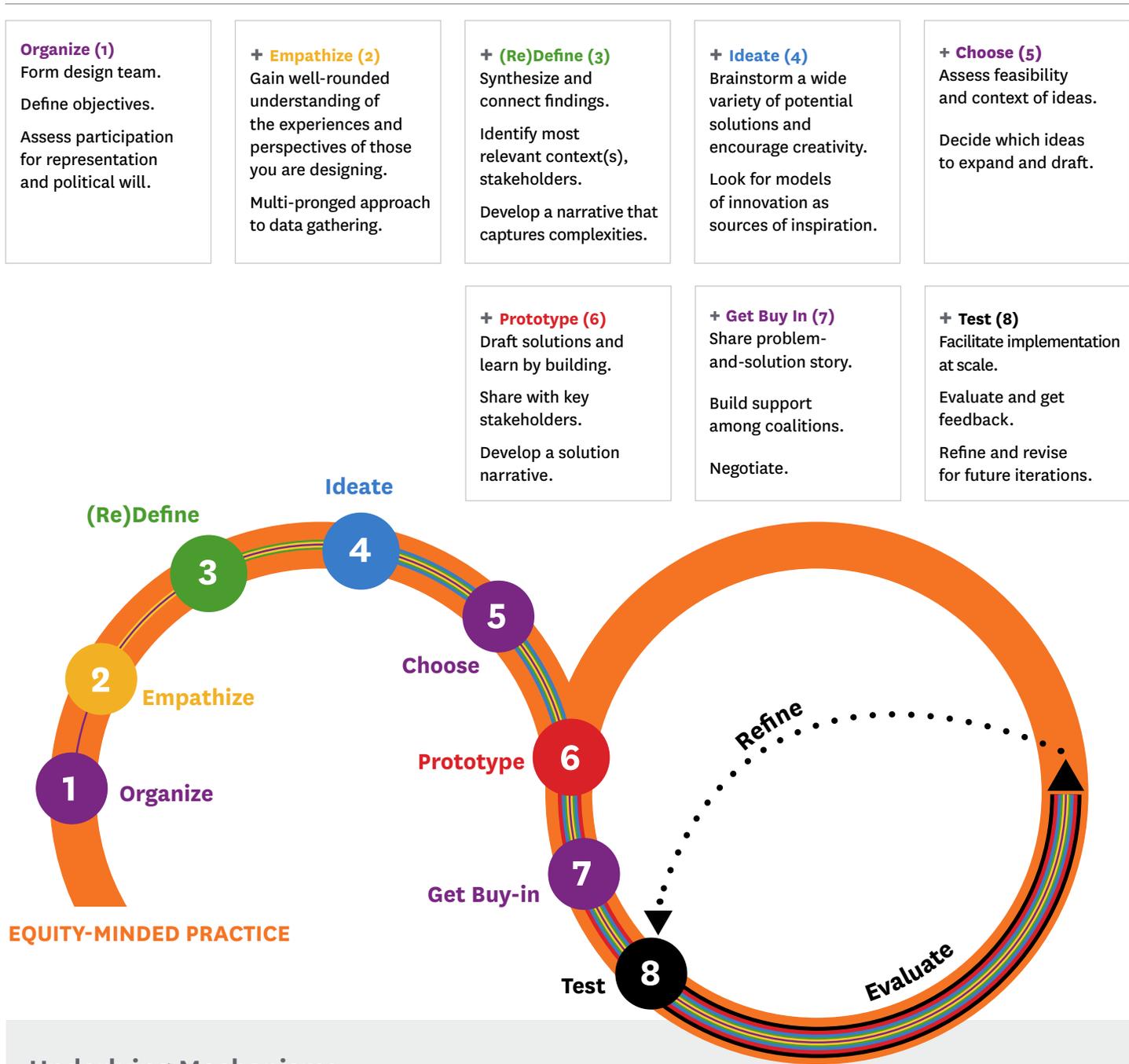
Figure 1

Design for Equity in Higher Education (DEHE) Model

Organize (1)
Form design team.

Define objectives.

Assess participation for representation and political will.

+ Empathize (2)
Gain well-rounded understanding of the experiences and perspectives of those you are designing.

Multi-pronged approach to data gathering.

+ (Re)Define (3)
Synthesize and connect findings.

Identify most relevant context(s), stakeholders.

Develop a narrative that captures complexities.

+ Ideate (4)
Brainstorm a wide variety of potential solutions and encourage creativity.

Look for models of innovation as sources of inspiration.

+ Choose (5)
Assess feasibility and context of ideas.

Decide which ideas to expand and draft.

+ Prototype (6)
Draft solutions and learn by building.

Share with key stakeholders.

Develop a solution narrative.

+ Get Buy In (7)
Share problem- and-solution story.

Build support among coalitions.

Negotiate.

+ Test (8)
Facilitate implementation at scale.

Evaluate and get feedback.

Refine and revise for future iterations.

(Re)Define — 3
Ideate — 4
2 — Empathize
Choose — 5
1 — Organize
Prototype — 6
Refine
7 — Get Buy-in
Evaluate
Test — 8

EQUITY-MINDED PRACTICE

Underlying Mechanisms

EQUITY-MINDED PRACTICE
· Address issues of identity, power, and values.
· Attend internally to team process and externally to design solutions.

Notice bias and power. Ensure intent increases equity. Be authentic.

Reflect on insights, actions, emotions, and impact.
Improve the process as you're working.

Collaborate and build relational trust. Share, don't sell.

ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT
· Understand political and bureaucratic landscape.
· Consider constraints and opportunities.

Navigate competing interests internally and externally.

Leverage institutional priorities and political will.

Negotiate with key stakeholders and decision-makers.

Equity-Minded Practice

The DEHE model situates equity-minded practices as underlying the entire design process in order to emphasize the ever-changing nature of power, oppression, and emotions. *Designers* must maintain self-awareness, check assumptions, and reserve judgment throughout. Additionally, we emphasize the continuous nature of reflection based on the potential for *designers* to refine the design process in the moment. In other words, making equity-mindedness an ongoing practice allows *designers* to notice and address shifts in team dynamics and in the political environment in order to re-center intentions and actions around equity, which can further strengthen relational trust among the team. As equity-minded practice underlies the entire process, we outline two liberatory mindsets that are applicable in every phase of DEHE.

Questions to Guide Equity-Minded Practice

Engage in continuous reflection to ensure equity within the team and in newly designed policies, programs, and practices.

Questions related to team process

- Whose voices are being heard and not heard?

- What assumptions have I made about other team members?

Questions related to design work

- How will this new design create greater equity and attend to healing?

- What will be the ongoing impact for others in terms of administration, assessment, advancement, inclusion, personal growth, etc.?

Liberatory Mindset	Description
Build Relational Trust	Invest in building relationships in the design team, with colleagues, and with key stakeholders. Attend to relating across difference. Act with integrity. Practice listening fully. Honor the stories of the colleagues you are designing for.
Attend to Healing	Oppression and equity work both take a physical, mental, and emotional toll. Practice self-care and compassion for others. Create healthy boundaries and expectations. Healing allows for more creative and liberating designs.

Organize

We add organization as a discrete phase of the DEHE model to address two aspects of the design thinking process that are particularly influenced by the organizational context of higher education: design team formation and the widespread role of political will in organization. Effective design teams in higher education are best comprised of *designers* with varying types of expertise, with some who understand the institutional landscape, some who can leverage political opportunities, and others who understand the problem firsthand. At the same time, the siloed nature of higher education and historically-rooted tensions that often exist between *stakeholders* can create challenges for the process and outcomes, both internally within the team and in external interactions. Equity-minded practice, including the liberatory mindsets described below, can help to address these issues.

Questions to Guide Organizing

Assess how the team is and/or can be organized. Use participatory design teams whenever possible.

- Which perspectives are being included in the team?

- What experiences and expertise does each member contribute?

- Do we collectively have a good understanding of how the institution works broadly?

- What power and connections do team members have that can improve our likelihood of success?

- How can the commitment of participation be recognized and rewarded?

Liberatory Mindset	Description
Practice Self-Awareness	Your many identities shape the way you see and engage in the world. Having awareness of your assumptions and biases, your talents and strengths, and your sources of privilege can help you be a better teammate and designer.
Seek Liberatory Collaboration	Nurture the diversity of strengths, talents, and perspectives of team members. Use participatory approaches. Foster partnerships. Disrupt silos by building bridges.

Empathize

In the empathize stage, the design team must gain a well-rounded understanding of the motivations, experiences, and emotions of their *colleagues*. *Designers* often use a multi-pronged approach to learning about *colleagues*, including interviews, focus groups, and observation, to inform their understanding of *colleagues* and their experiences. *Designers* can also use existing institutional data and/or collect survey data to give them a wider view of the institutional population and to learn more about the institutional landscape, including structure, priorities, and funding, to better understand the experiences of *colleagues* holistically. Additionally, scholarly literature provides a deeper understanding of what is known about the topic more broadly and to learn about different perspectives; this approach can also foster ideas and language that support later phases of the process. In this phase, it is important for *designers* to be attentive to capturing the diversity of their colleagues and their experiences.

Questions to Guide Empathizing

Use both qualitative data (focus groups, interviews, observations) and quantitative data (surveys, institutional data) to get a holistic understanding. Center the colleagues you are designing for.

- **What are the daily, weekly, and semester-long experiences of the colleagues we are designing for?**

- **How do different environments (classrooms, departments, colleges) shape these experiences?**

- **How are these experiences similar to and different from your own?**

- **What causes and effects do your colleagues identify when talking about the challenges they face?**

- **What experiences might your colleagues not want to talk about? How can you learn about these?**

Liberatory Mindset	Description
Focus on human values	Talk and listen actively. Approach interactions with respect, appreciation, openness, humility, and acceptance. Make an effort to learn about others' lives outside of work.

*(Re)*Define

Once data collection has finished, *designers* synthesize findings to gain an understanding of their *colleagues'* needs and articulate insights about the situation. In higher education, organization of the design team often occurs because a problem has been identified. However, the empathize phase often reveals that there are connections between multiple issues. Thus, *designers* must address the complex nature of human problems by redefining the problem. One liberatory design thinking tool frequently used in this stage is empathy mapping, where designers outline what end users say, do, think, and feel in order to define the problem in the context of user needs, preferences, and expectations (Clifford, 2017). Even if some of the structures, practices, assumptions, cultures, and approaches that contribute to the problem cannot be changed, identifying the context fully helps *designers* to understand their *colleagues* and the problem differently.

Questions to Guide (Re)Defining

As many design teams are organized around an initially stated problem, it is important to reconsider what is really at stake.

- What policies and practices (or lack thereof) contribute to the issue at hand?

- What are the implicit norms and/or cultures that may be perpetuating the problem?

- What inferences can you make based on your learning in the empathy phase?

- How do different story organizations (e.g., chronological, topical, spatial, comparative) help you understand the issue differently?

- What new information and/or realizations have surprised you the most?

Liberatory Mindset	Description
Catalyze opportunities to transform power	Inequities are often rooted in systemic oppression. Make power and privilege visible. Consider how to redistribute power in the design team and in the larger institution.
Embrace complexity	Acknowledge the emotional component of ambiguity and messy situations. Practice patience. Remember that what is comfortable often perpetuates the status quo.

Ideate

The ideate phase is at the heart of the innovation that occurs in the design thinking process. Here, designers brainstorm a wide variety of possible solutions. While the goal of ideation is to withhold judgment of the feasibility of any idea, which allows *designers* to challenge assumptions about the nature of the problem and potential solutions, the constraints of the higher education environment are often everpresent within design teams. Teams can research potential solutions by reading scholarship and looking at models from other institutions, sources of ideation that are not usually part of the design thinking approach. *Designers* can also apply experiential knowledge gained through their careers, including models from other institutions where they have previously worked. While these approaches can be inspirational, they are also relatively conservative, as replication limits the potential for innovation.

Questions to Guide Ideation

Foster open-mindedness and imagine possibilities without constraints; even small acts of creative thinking can result in more innovative change.

- How could the experiences of your colleagues be improved and made more equitable right away and over time?

- What could you do with unlimited resources (e.g., time, space, budget, personnel, etc.)?

- How could solutions at other institutions be adapted and improved for your context?

- How can the problem be reframed to foster more creative solutions given existing constraints?

Liberatory Mindset	Description
Exercise your creative courage	Honor your imagination and that of others. Let go of self-doubt and judgment. We are all creative beings, and creativity flourishes with diversity. Practice curiosity.

Choose

In higher education, iterating between ideation and prototyping is far more constrained than in the private sector, so choosing ideas to pursue takes on more importance. *Designers* consider the feasibility and the likely responses of *colleagues* and key stakeholders when choosing which ideas to prototype, especially with awareness that the chosen solution will likely have far-reaching impact beyond their *colleagues*. Thus, it is important for design teams to consider how chosen solutions may affect equity and inclusion more broadly among the institutional community. *Designers* should address the emotional aspects of choosing as well as practicing self-awareness to let go of ego and attachment in this phase. In some cases, design teams may narrow ideas, moving several potential solutions forward into prototyping, rather than only choosing one.

Questions to Guide Choosing

Center equity when considering choices to move forward.

- **What solutions could be implemented immediately and over time?**

- **Given constraints (often related to time, resources, approvals), are there multiple ways forward? Are there one or two solutions that best increase equity and improve colleagues' experiences?**

- **What will the approval process look like?**

- **Are there stakeholders outside the design team who can or should provide feedback at this stage to improve likelihood of success?**

Liberatory Mindset	Description
Work with our fear and discomfort	Fear and discomfort are natural responses to the unknown. Acknowledging these feelings can help you and other team members engage authentically in the process. Identifying the source of these feelings can also foster creativity and growth. (Note that this type of discomfort is different from that which results from oppression and inequality, which should be addressed through healing.)

Prototype

During the prototype phase, the design team develops outlines and/or mockups, developing the solution as they build it. In design thinking, because of the expectation of iteration, rapid prototyping is key; rather than spending a lot of time and energy to fully develop a solution before testing it, designers quickly sketch out the solution in order to experiment with it. However, given the risk-averse environment of higher education generally, maintaining a prototyping mindset can be challenging for *designers*. Additionally, while including *key stakeholders* in conversations before sharing out solutions more widely can improve the team's likelihood of success, they often expect to be presented with a complete, polished solution rather than a "rough draft," In anticipation of this, *designers* can frame prototypes explicitly as drafts for feedback and/or build multiple prototypes simultaneously, rather than iteratively, as providing options can increase the likelihood that *key stakeholders* agree with at least one solution. Further, because of the information asymmetry that is inherent in loosely-coupled organization, *designers* should craft narratives of the redefined problem and solution as well as the design process to share alongside their prototypes, drawing especially from information gathered about *colleagues* in the empathy phase, in order to justify the proposed solution and to make their process transparent.

Questions to Guide Prototyping

Once the team has narrowed options generated from the ideate stage, the team can create a rough draft, model, and/or pilot to share about solutions.

- Given that there will likely be multiple revisions, compromises, and improvements before any new policies, programs, and practices are implemented, what is the minimum outline or draft that can be shared out?

- How can you develop a narrative about the team process that will contextualize your solution and help to build empathy and understanding among stakeholders?

- How can you help stakeholders adapt a prototyping mindset?

Liberatory Mindset	Description
Bias towards experimentation	Innovation requires risk-taking. See mistakes as opportunities for learning. Take time to reflect. Remember that prototypes will likely be revised during and after prototyping. Actively practice letting go of perfectionism.

Get Buy-In

The buy-in phase acknowledges the reality in higher education that a great deal of negotiation occurs between the proposal and implementation of a solution, work that is steeped in political considerations. To successfully implement a new policy, program, or practice, *designers* often require approval from multiple *key stakeholders*, including administrative leaders, members of shared governance, unions, and/or even institutional trustees. Design teams engage in complex work to move solutions into implementation and testing, and infusing this work with equity-minded practice can foster buy-in. For instance, when sharing their problem-and-solution narrative, *designers* should connect their narrative to institutional objectives related to accreditation, strategic planning, and student success in order to inform and persuade various key stakeholders. *Designers* should also acknowledge the emotional challenges related to the liberatory practice of non-attachment; letting go of some solutions and compromising on others to get buy-in can be difficult.

Questions to Guide Getting Buy-In

Getting buy-in is a process. Some members of your team may be better positioned and/or more adept at building consensus. Decide as a team how you will work individually and as a group in this phase.

- How can you create a plan for sharing your prototype to build consensus?

- Which leaders, coalitions, and groups will be involved in the approval and implementation process?

- Who should you bring on board first? Second?

- Where are you likely to face some resistance?

- How can the story of your design process be used to facilitate buy-in from others?

- What approaches will you use to negotiate, collaborate, and compromise with stakeholders outside of the design team?

Liberatory Mindset	Description
Share, don't sell	Be transparent about your design process. Make visible you learned in the empathy phase and how that has informed your prototype. Sharing invites others into the process for collaboration and requires letting go of control.

Scale and Test (Evaluate and Refine)

After buy-in has occurred, the solution can be implemented. While some design solutions in higher education may result in pilot testing, implementation of the negotiated solution at scale is far more common. The culture of continuous improvement in higher education supports ongoing evaluation and refinement. Implementation of new policies and practices usually relies on multiple *key stakeholders*, so solutions will be further shaped and developed while they are being implemented at scale. Further, when evaluation is ongoing, assessments will often be conducted by *key stakeholders* rather than by the design team. Such flexibility in implementation allows for improvement, but may also reflect slippage. To promote fidelity, *designers* can continue to share their problem-and-solution narrative, especially to shape the validity of their recommendations for implementation.

Questions to Guide Scaling and Testing

While many new programs, policies, and practices will be implemented, evaluated, and refined by people outside of the design team, considering these aspects of design now can improve long-term outcomes.

- How can you get feedback about your colleagues' experiences quickly after implementation?

- After implementation, what is the best approach to evaluate the new policy, program, or practice?

- Are there improvements you already know can be made?

- What are the key aspects of the solution that are important for increasing equity?

- As stakeholders and the institutional context change, how can the narrative of the team process be shared in on ongoing fashion to continue getting buy-in?

Liberatory Mindset	Description
Recognize oppression	Every aspect of design, from conception to evaluation, depends on the frames you use. Practice recognizing and naming the root causes of oppression at multiple levels. Consider the intended and potential unintended consequences of your design in terms of equity.

Additional Resources

Further Learning About Design Thinking and Liberatory Design Thinking

Brown, T. (2009). *Designers — think big!* [Video]. TED Conferences. **https://www.ted.com/talks/tim_brown_designers_think_big**

Brown, T., & Wyatt, J. (2010). *Design thinking for social innovation*. Stanford Social Innovation Review. **https://ssir.org/articles/entry/design_thinking_for_social_innovation**

Clifford, D. H. & design school X (2020). *Equity-centered design thinking framework*. Stanford and design school X. **https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/equity-centered-design-framework**

Coughlan, P., Sure, J. F., & Canales, K. (2007) Prototypes as (design) tools for behavioral and organizational change. *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science, 43* (1), 1-13. **https://new-ideo-com.s3.amazonaws.com/assets/files/pdfs/news/Prototypes_as_Design_Tools_1.pdf**

Dam, R. F., & Siang, T. Y. (2020). *What is design thinking and why is it so popular?*. **https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/what-is-design-thinking-and-why-is-it-so-popular**

Practical Tools for Designing for Equity

Anaissie, T., Cary, V., Clifford, D., Malarkey, T. & Wise, S. (2020). *Liberatory design: your toolkit to design for equity, version 1.0* [card deck]. Stanford k12 lab network. **https://dschool.stanford.edu/s/Liberatory-Design-Cards.pdf**

Culver, K. C., Harper, J., & Kezar, A. (2021). *Design for equity in higher education*. The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success. **https://pullias.usc.edu/download/design-for-equity-in-higher-education/**

Doorley, S., Holcomb, S., Klebahn, P., Segovia, K., & Utley, J. (2018). *d.school bootleg deck*. **https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/design-thinking-bootleg**

Harte, S. Y. (n.d.). *d.school Starter Kit* [slide deck]. **https://dschool.stanford.edu/resources/dschool-starter-kit**

IDEO.org. (n.d.). *Design kit methods*. **https://www.designkit.org/methods**

National Equity Project. (2020). *Liberatory design mindset activities*. **https://www.nationalequityproject.org/s/Liberatory-Design-Mindset-Activities-Prototype.pdf**

Practical Tools for Increasing Equity for Non-Tenure-Track Faculty

The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success (2012). *Non-tenure-track faculty on our campus: A guide for campus task forces to better understand faculty working conditions and the necessity of change*. **https://pullias.usc.edu/download/non-tenure-track-faculty-campus-guide-campus-task-forces-better-understand-faculty-working-conditions-necessity-change/?wpdmdl=13884&refresh=6037f95b7600a1614281051**

The Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success (2015). *Departmental cultures and non-tenure-track faculty: A self-assessment tool for departments*. **https://pullias.usc.edu/download/departmental-cultures-non-tenure-track-faculty-self-assessment-tool-departments/?wpdmdl=13888&refresh=6037f8f490e2b1614280948**

Project Team

Adrianna Kezar, Director and Principal Investigator

Adrianna Kezar is the Dean's Professor for Higher Education Leadership at the University of Southern California and director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the USC Rossier School of Education. She is a national expert on student success, equity and diversity, change, governance and leadership in higher education.

KC Culver, Senior Postdoctoral Research Associate

KC Culver is a senior postdoctoral research associate in the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the USC Rossier School of Education. She employs quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods to study the impact of educational policy and practice on the development and success of diverse students. Her research focuses on policies and practices related to faculty, curriculum, and learning environments.

Jordan Harper, Research Assistant

Jordan Harper is a second-year Ph.D. student in the Urban Education Policy program at Rossier. His research interests include non-tenure track faculty, student leadership development, and graduate admissions and transition. Jordan approaches all of his research with an equity and inclusion lens.

About the Pullias Center for Higher Education

The world's leading research center on student access and success in higher education, the Pullias Center for Higher Education advances innovative, scalable solutions to improve college outcomes for underserved students and to enhance the performance of postsecondary institutions. The Pullias Center is located within the USC Rossier School of Education, one of the world's premier centers for graduate study in urban education.

Since 1995, the mission of the Pullias Center for Higher Education is to bring a multidisciplinary perspective to complex social, political, and economic issues in higher education. Our work is devoted to the key issues of college access, retention, and accountability for underserved students—and the effectiveness of the colleges and universities that serve them. Both directly and through our research, we engage with institutional leaders, policymakers and the community at large to address the major challenges in educational equity today. For more information, please visit: **https://pullias.usc.edu**

Funding

March 2021

Phase	Quick Reference: Questions to Guide Practice
Equity-Minded Practice	Whose voices are being heard and not heard? What assumptions have I made about other team members? How will this new design create greater equity and attend to healing? What will be the ongoing impact for others in terms of administration, assessment, advancement, inclusion, personal growth, etc.?
Organize	Which perspectives are being included in the team? What experiences and expertise does each member contribute? Do we collectively have a good understanding of how the institution works broadly? What power and connections do team members have that can improve our likelihood of success? How can the commitment of participation be recognized and rewarded?
Empathize	What are the daily, weekly, and semester-long experiences of the colleagues we are designing for? How do different environments (classrooms, departments, colleges) shape these experiences? How are these experiences similar to and different from your own? What causes and effects do your colleagues identify when talking about the challenges they face? What experiences might your colleagues not want to talk about? How can you learn about these?
(Re)Define	What policies and practices (or lack thereof) contribute to the issue at hand? What are the implicit norms and/or cultures that may be perpetuating the problem? What inferences can you make based on your learning in the empathy phase? How do different story organizations (e.g.,chronological, topical, spatial, comparative) help you understand the issue differently? What new information and/or realizations have surprised you the most?
Ideate	How could the experiences of your colleagues be improved and made more equitable right away and over time? What could you do with unlimited resources (e.g., time, space, budget, personnel, etc.)? How could solutions at other institutions be adapted and improved for your context? How can the problem be reframed to foster more creative solutions given existing constraints? What happens if you challenge assumptions about the "musts" for the solution?
Choose	What solutions could be implemented immediately and over time? Given constraints (often related to time, resources, approvals), are there multiple ways forward? Are there one or two solutions that best increase equity and improve colleagues' experiences? What will the approval process look like? Are there stakeholders outside the design team who can or should provide feedback at this stage to improve likelihood of success?
Prototype	Given that there will likely be multiple revisions, compromises, and improvements before any new policies, programs, and practices are implemented, what is the minimum outline or draft that can be shared out? How can you develop a narrative about the team process that will contextualize your solution and help to build empathy and understanding among stakeholders? How can you help stakeholders adapt a prototyping mindset?
Get Buy-in	How can you create a plan for sharing your prototype to build consensus? Which leaders, coalitions, and groups will be involved in the approval and implementation process? Who should you bring on board first? Second? Where are you likely to face some resistance? How can the story of your design process be used to facilitate buy-in from others? What approaches will you use to negotiate, collaborate, and compromise with stakeholders outside of the design team?
Scale and Test	How can you get feedback about your colleagues' experiences quickly after implementation? After implementation, what is the best approach to evaluate the new policy, program, or practice? Are there improvements you already know can be made? What are the key aspects of the solution that are important for increasing equity? As stakeholders and the institutional context change, how can the narrative of the team process be shared in on ongoing fashion to continue getting buy-in?