THE COUNCIL FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ACCREDITATION (CHEA) EQUITY SURVEY

Introduction

The higher education system in the United States of America consists of many different types of institutions that afford quality education to the diverse people who make up the nation's population. The system, which is largely independent from federal government regulation, consists of institutions that are public, private, rural, urban, vocational, liberal arts, research-focused, secular, religious, minority-serving, among a host of other designations. Accreditation is employed to assure quality within this diverse community, and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) is the non-governmental agency that fortifies the accreditation process by way of recognition.

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation, as an advocate for quality in higher education,

> "Supports and works to advance the role of accreditation in maintaining the core academic values of higher education – commitments to institutional autonomy, academic freedom and institutional mission."[1]

Inherent in its advocacy is its commitment to cultivate and support,

> "…an environment that demonstrates appreciation for and values the diversity of its institutions of higher education, accreditors, board and staff, and all who are served by these groups."

On December 3, 2021, CHEA posted the [2021 CHEA Recognition Policy and Procedures](#),[2] which included a new standard, Standard 3.A., that states:

> "A recognized accrediting organization demonstrates that it manifests a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion."

After a year of implementation, CHEA sought to gauge how CHEA-recognized accreditors addressed, or were positioned to address, the standard. Accordingly, CHEA launched a survey in February 2023 for the primary purpose of learning how CHEA accreditors understand and operationalize the singular construct of **equity**. CHEA recognizes 63 accreditors in the United States of America (USA), of which eight (8) are institutional, four (4) are national faith-related, and 51 are programmatic.

Methodology

Survey questions were developed by CHEA Executive Team members and reviewed for validity of purpose. The seven question-survey was administered electronically using Google Forms to all (63) CHEA accreditors on February 20, 2023. The submission deadline was March 27, 2023, thereby allowing the accreditors five weeks to submit their response. Within that timeframe, two reminders were sent on March 13, 2023, and March 24, 2023. Survey responses were captured using the same Google platform.

Definitions of the term **equity** were intentionally omitted from the survey to afford respondents with the opportunity to provide responses based solely on personal perception of organizational understanding and

operationalization of the construct. In addition to demographic information (i.e., name of the organization, position of the person completing the survey, and number of employees within the organization), the survey asked the following questions:

1. In thinking about your response to CHEA's Standard 3.A., which one of the descriptors below (Social Justice, Fairness, Belonging, Equality, Other) best describes your organization's understanding of *equity*?

2. Does your organization have any policies that address the application of *equity* within its internal operations?

3. Did your organization have *equity* policies prior to CHEA's Standard 3.A.?

4. Does your organization have a standard that addresses the application of *equity* when reviewing institutional members?

5. Please share additional information of how your organization operationalizes *equity*.

6. Of the three constructs (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion), which one has the most relevance for your organization?

Findings/Results

In total, 28 responses to the survey were received from CHEA-recognized accreditors. Since one accreditor submitted identical responses twice, the data presented reflect responses from 27 (43%) accrediting organizations. The 27 respondents include four institutional accreditors and 23 programmatic accreditors. The results are presented within the following categories: demographic information and operationalization of *equity*.

Demographic Information

Twenty-four (89%) of the survey respondents were either Chief Executive Officers, Presidents and/or Directors. The remaining three respondents (11%) were managers, chairpersons and/or accreditation liaisons.

Twelve (45%) of the 27 accreditors that responded to the survey had 1-5 employees working within the organization, while six accreditors (22%) had more than 20 employees, six accreditors (22%) had 5-10 employees and three (11%) accreditors had 10-20 employees (**Figure 1**.).
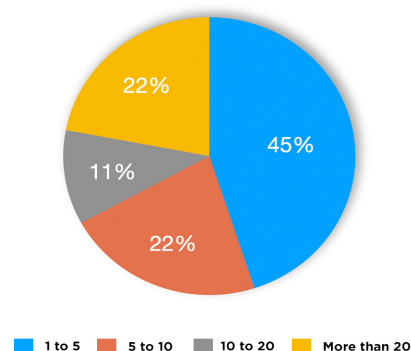

1 to 5   **5 to 10**   **10 to 20**   **More than 20**

Figure 1. Number of employees per organization.
Reported numbers are based on 27 responding CHEA-recognized accreditors

Operationalization of Equity

In response to CHEA's Standard 3.A. (**Figure 2.),** 13 (48%) respondents indicated that they understood *equity* to be best described as "fairness" while eight (29%) respondents understood it as "social justice." Twelve (92%) of the 13 respondents that understood *equity* to be best described as "fairness" were programmatic accreditors, and seven (88%) out of eight respondents that related *equity* with "social justice" were also programmatic accreditors. Two (7%) respondents (one each) who represented programmatic accrediting organizations indicated that *equity* was best described by the terms "belonging" and surprisingly, "equality." Four (14%) respondents indicated an "other" response, two (50%) of whom were from institutional accrediting organizations.
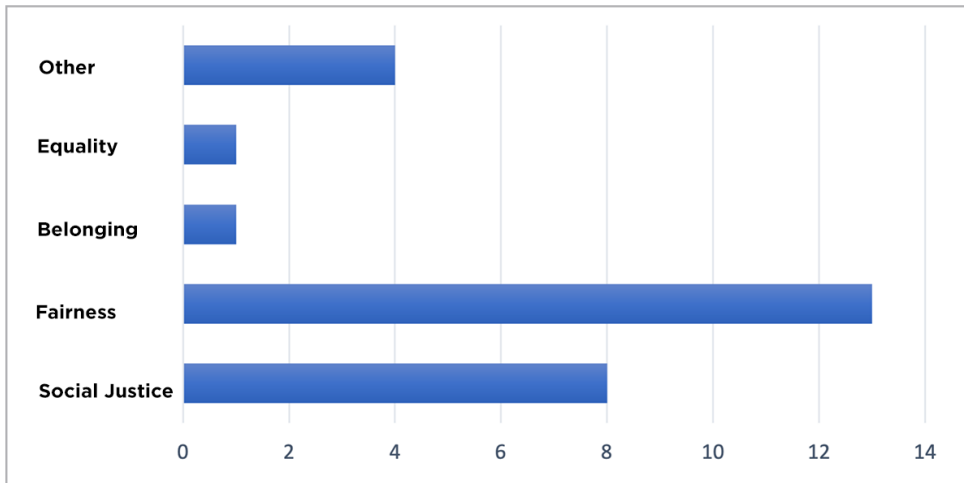
Figure 2. Quantitative results of perceptions of Acccreditors' understanding of *equity*

Twenty-two respondents (81%) further explained their organizations' understanding of **equity.** Samples of the key responses for respondents' choices of "other", "fairness" and "social justice" are provided in **Table 1.**

Table 1. Verbatim opinions regarding **equity.**

Other	Fairness	Social Justice
Believe that all four of the descriptors carry equal weight in maintaining an equitable workplace. They continually strive to maintain an inclusive environment where students, institution representatives, staff, volunteers, and board members feel welcomed, safe, valued, and respected.	Equal opportunity for all without biasness.	What we want to embody organizationally, but also covers areas of research and pedagogy for faculty.
The conditions under which every individual has the resources and support needed to be successful. Equity, distinct from equality, is based on the principles of fairness and justice. Equity is achieved when lived experience is honored and there is intentionality in identifying and disrupting systemic structural barriers as well as implicit biases in policy and practice.	Fairness in recruitment of trainees and staff, hiring and admissions processes and in evaluation and promotion activities.	That is, taking into account systematic inequalities to ensure that our accredited programs are accessible to a wide range of students interested in careers in psychological clinical science.
Equity seeks to ensure that each person can succeed, recognizing that we do not all start from the same place. Imbalances have to be acknowledged and adjustments made to account for them. It has to be a continuous process, meaning that we identify and overcome barriers.	The application of standards, policies and procedures are implemented in a fair and access to information and resources for all person.	Promote culturally responsive and sustaining practices and evidence that is free of bias and that is accurate and fair for all those who are assessed.

Seventy percent (19) of the respondents indicated that their organizations had policies that addressed the application of **equity** within the organization. They indicated that such policies were manifested in broad-based goals, organizational by-laws, position statements, personnel handbooks, accreditation standards, and strategic plans. Furthermore, 63% (17) of the respondents indicated that they had such policies in place before the introduction and enactment of CHEA's Standard 3.A. Similarly, 74% (20) of all respondents stated that their accrediting organizations had at least one standard that addresses that application of **equity** when reviewing institutional members.

Finally, when asked which of the three constructs (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion) was most relevant to CHEA accreditors, 85% (23) stated that all three were of equal importance. The remaining 15% (4) were equally divided between "diversity" and **equity.**

Summary/Conclusions

The study served to collect preliminary information on CHEA-recognized accreditors' response to CHEA's standard on diversity, equity, and inclusion. With the fair-to-moderate response rate to the survey, results reported herein cannot be generalized to the entire CHEA accreditor population. From the responses obtained, the following findings are noted:

- Accrediting organizations (regardless of size, geographic location, or purpose) have begun to address CHEA's Recognition Standard 3.A.
- Some accrediting organizations had already incorporated aspects of DEI before the implementation of CHEA's Recognition Standard 3.A.
- Organizations' understanding of **equity** primarily align with the construct of "fairness" and elicit notions of "social justice."
- Some accrediting organizations seem to be aware of, and have partially adopted, formal definitions of **equity.**

The final point pulls from qualitative responses that expounded on perceptions of the **equity** construct when compared with formal definitions of the term. For instance, some explanations aligned with that of Rothwell, *et al*, which states:

> "Equity refers to fairness in policies, procedures, and practices. The organizational goal is typically to ensure equal access to the programs, services, support, and opportunities appropriate to a constituency, role, or work". [3]

Similarly, certain perceptions aligned with that of Jeske, *et al* which states:

> "… we define equity in scientific research as the absence of disparities in opportunities, leadership positions, and access to academic networks and resources that are systematically associated with social position, especially, but not only racial and ethnic identity." [4]

Acknowledgements

References

1. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation, (2021) About CHEA. (2021). Can be accessed at https://www.chea.org/about-chea

2. The Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (2021, December 3). CHEA Standards and Procedures for Recognition (2021). Washington: The Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

3. Rothwell, W. J., Ealy, P. L., & Campbell, J. (2022). Rethinking organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion: A step-by-step guide for Facilitating Effective Change. Productivity Press.

4. Jeske, M., Vasquez, E., Fullerton, S., Saperstein, A., Bentz, M., Foti, N., Shim, J., Soo-Jin Lee, S. (2022). Beyond inclusion: Enacting team equity in precision medicine research. PLoS ONE 17(2): e0263750