The Lenses We Employ in our Equity Work

Moving from Deficit to Anti-Deficit Approaches to Serving Students

Desiree D. Zerquera, PhD
July 10, 2020

Our Current Moment in the World

Our Current Moment in the World

Our Current Moment in the World

What does this Mean for Higher Education?

- Exacerbated inequities
- Lack of clarity regarding the future
- Need to look inwards
- Courage to engage in structural change

Overview of Session

- Understand concept of deficit and its role as a barrier to equity
- Explore alternatives to deficit approaches
- Consider efforts for addressing deficit lenses at your institution

Ways we See the World

- We each have lenses that guide our thought patterns and actions
- Not necessarily limited or fixed
  - Can use multiple lenses at the same time
  - Your own worldview can evolve

Experiences

Media

Networks

Aspirations

Training

Upbringing
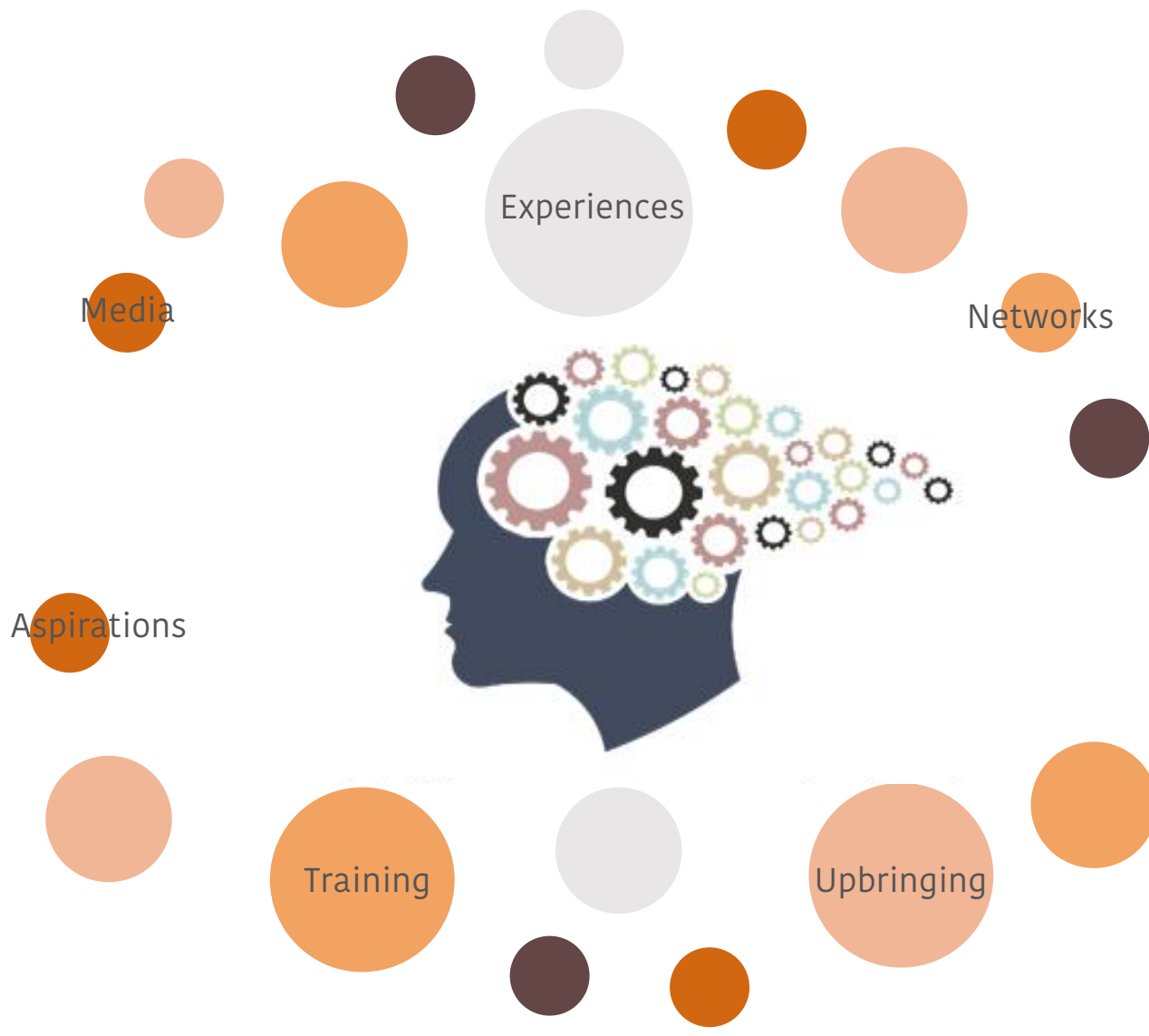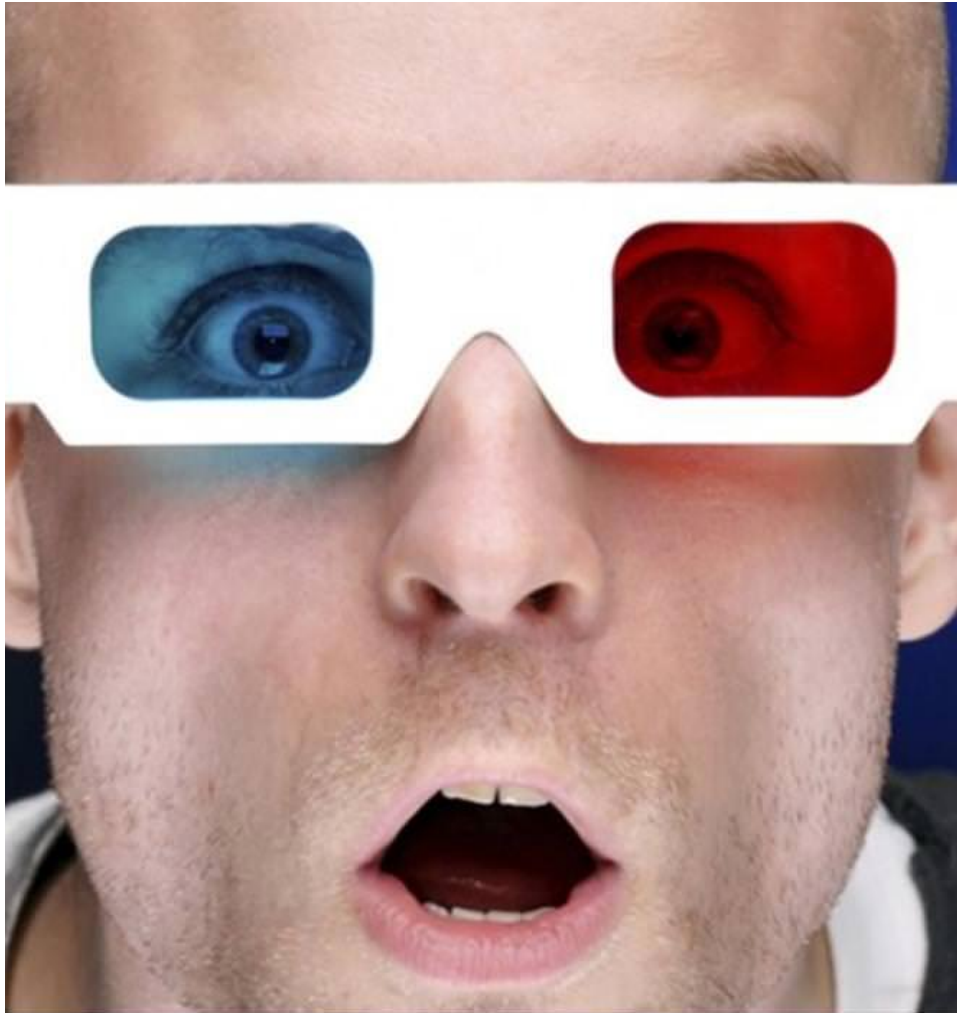
Left Image

Right Image

3-D Anaglyph Image

What is a lens?

- Names and categories for things that are around us
  - Helps us see the water we're swimming in
  - Once we see it, can touch it, can name it, can understand it
  - Then we can find ways to change it
- Lenses we use are powerful
  - Shapes what we see
  - Shapes what we don't see
  - We determine them, they entrap us
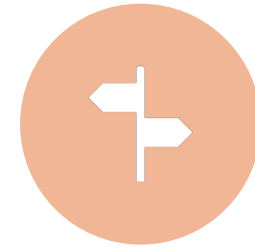- We can evolve, grow, and deepen the lenses we use

Our Lenses in Higher Education

- Theories
- Individuals: Mentors, Students, Colleagues
- Experiences: Personal, Professional

Deficit Lenses in Higher Education
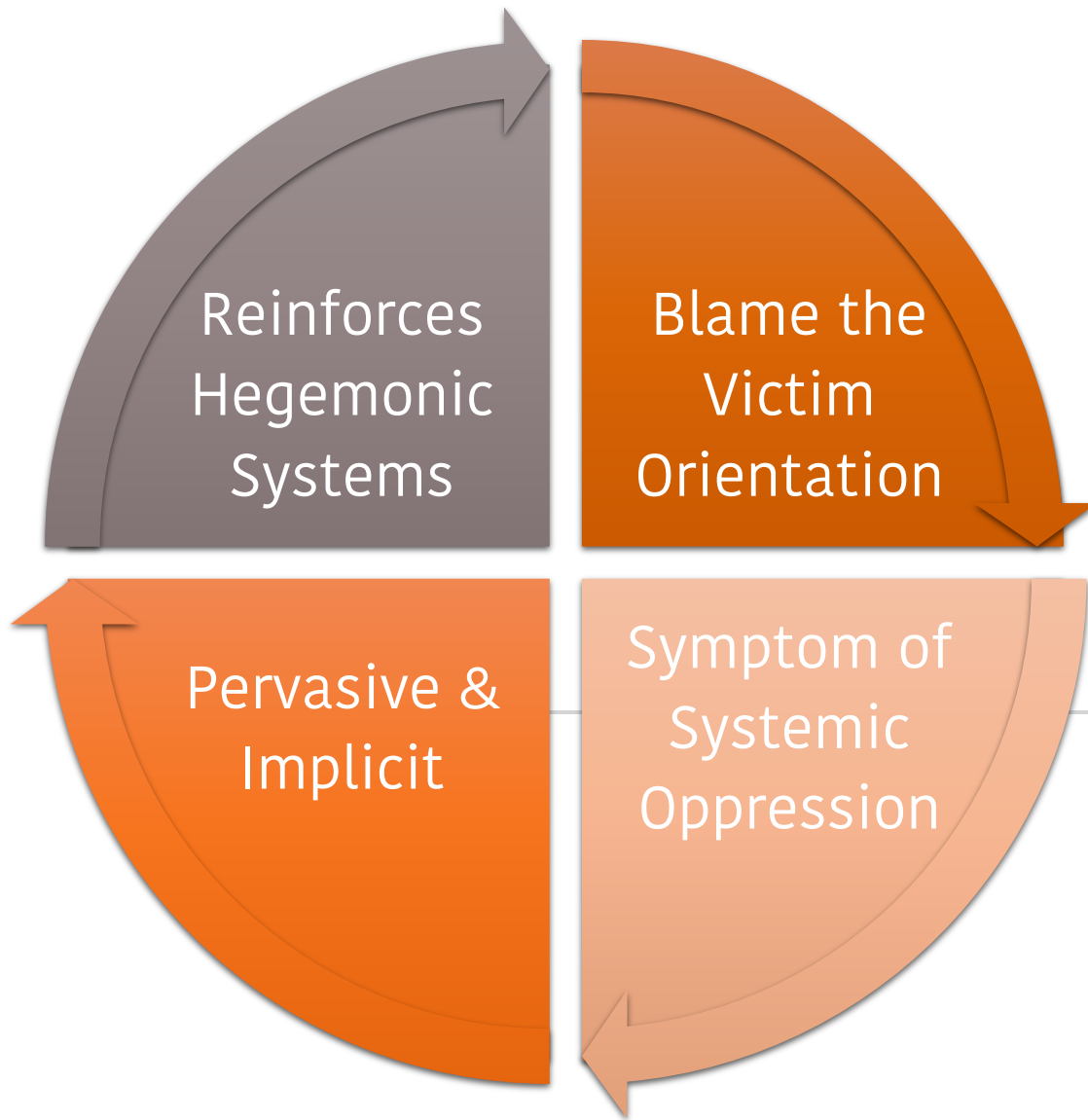
Lenses of Deficit

- deficit (Merriam-Webster):
  - an amount that is less than the amount that is needed
  - the amount by which a person or team is behind in a game or contest
  - a problem that causes a decrease in some ability

What is deficit thinking?

- holds students from marginalized backgrounds responsible for the challenges they face & inequities that result

- assumes students of color & low-income students underperform & fail to succeed because of "cultural deprivation" at levels of individual, community, or culture

- perpetuates idea that we need to "fix" students & communities

Sources: Patton Davis & Museus, 2019; Irizarry, 2009; Perez et al, 2017; Steele, 1997

Why is it a Problem?

- blinds us to our **role in** & **responsibility for** students' success and struggles
- equity efforts are **exclusively additive** & absent of structural focus
- infiltrates interactions between individuals → exclusion, pejorative interactions, internalization by marginalized groups

Elements of Deficit Lenses

Reinforces Hegemonic Systems

Blame the Victim Orientation

Pervasive & Implicit

Symptom of Systemic Oppression

Source: Patton Davis, L. & Museus, S. (2019). What Is Deficit Thinking? An Analysis of Conceptualizations of Deficit Thinking and Implications for Scholarly Research. *Currents, 1*(1), 117-130.

"Blame the Victim" Orientation

- Inequities faced by communities are their own fault
- Individual traits are source of failure
  - e.g., "the students are too lazy and don't try hard enough"
  - disregards forces that produce & perpetuate challenges
- Cultures are responsible
  - e.g., "Latinos don't value education"
  - focus on students' environments
  - e.g., "students from low-income families aren't able to study at home"

Symptom of Systemic Oppression

- stems from negative beliefs regarding ability, aspirations, & work ethic (Irizarry, 2009)
- reflects ideologies that work against marginalized people
  - Racism & classism ideologies
  - Meritocracy
  - Colorblindness
- Examples
  - "if they just worked harder"
  - "THAT community just isn't as smart"

Pervasive & Implicit

- Everywhere!
  - Structural level: policies and practices
  - Cultural Level: language/discourse and values
  - Individual Level: worldviews and ways of understanding

- Examples
  - labeling students "at-risk"
  - focus on students' grit

Reinforces Hegemonic Systems

- Creates negative consequences that are part of broader inequities
  - e.g., expecting less of students of color which can lead to disengagement
- Can push for "quick fixes" instead of systemic changes
  - E.g., additive programs instead of structural change to existing efforts

What manifestations of deficit thinking do you hear/see on your campus?

"Latino families don't care about education"

"Black students always struggle in Math"

"at-risk" students identified based on demographic background early in the semester

"Low-income students don't try as hard in school because they have to work"

Colleagues stating "We should grade students of color less harshly"

Bridge/Mentoring/Tutoring/etc programs are offered as the solution to addressing low student outcomes

Quantitative data results presented: "Black & Latino male students failed to graduate at rates 3x lower than those of white students"

Something else? (Share in Chat on Zoom)

Alternatives to Deficit

manifestations of deficit thinking & alternative approaches

Latino families don't care about education

Black students always struggle in Math

How can we better engage the Latino community as an institution?

What approaches can better support Black students in their math coursework?

Our equity agenda focuses identifying the barriers we impose on students

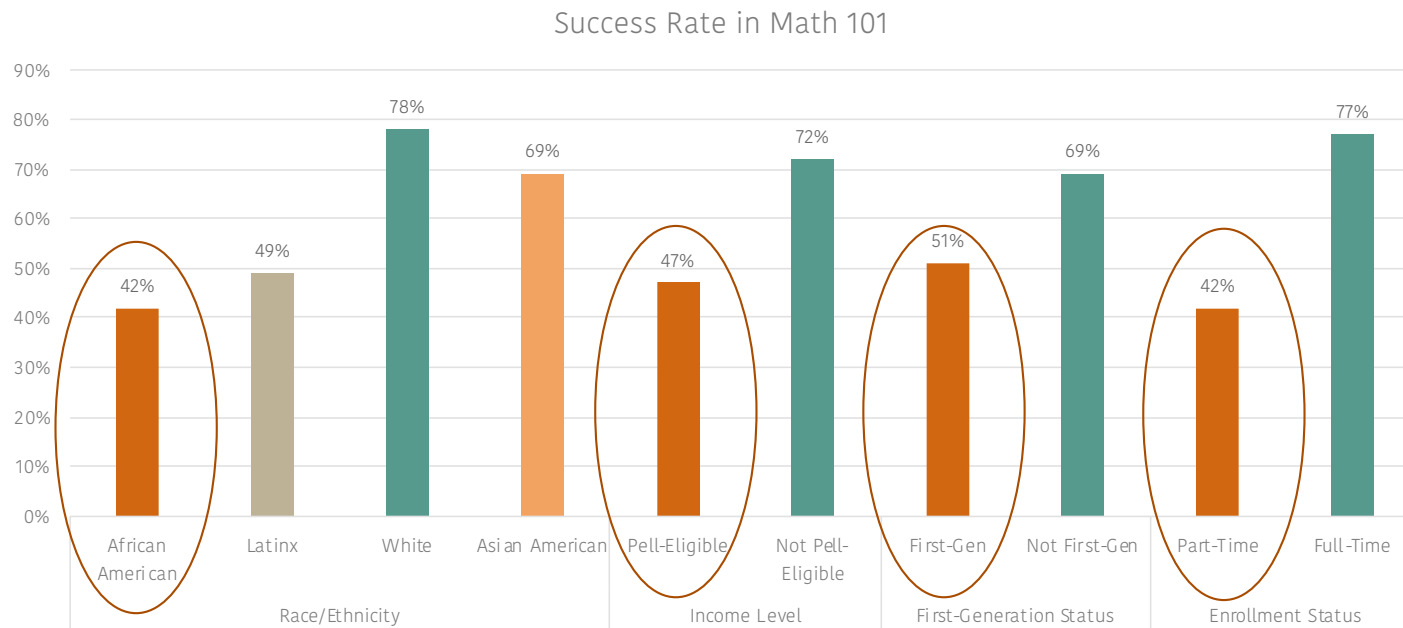Bridge programs are one part of our efforts to better know and support our students in their success

Our equity agenda focuses on helping students

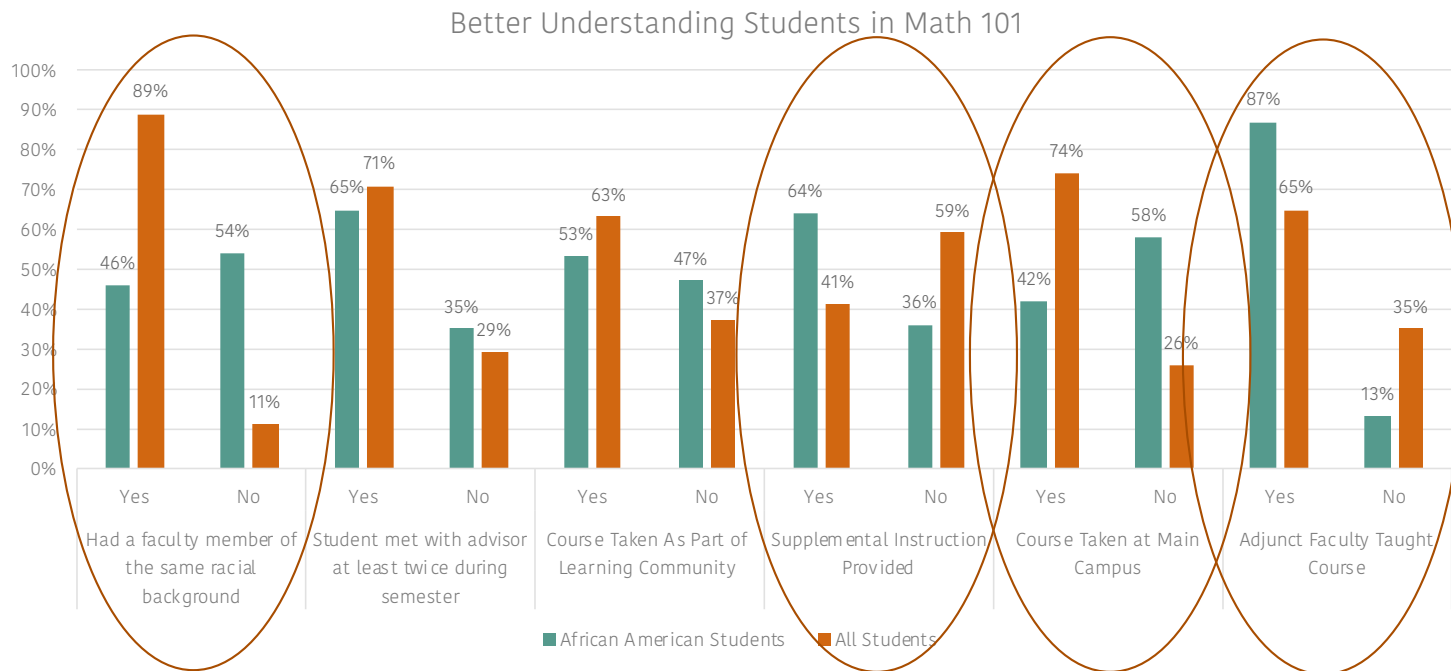Bridge programs are the solution to addressing low student outcomes

Alternatives to Deficit for Understanding Quantitative Data

- The strongest predictors of students' success in Mathematics courses was being African American, coming from a low-income household, and being in a course taught by part-time faculty
  - Across pre-baccalaureate mathematics/quantitative reasoning courses:
    - Low-income African American students are more likely to be in courses taught by part-time faculty
    - Success rates in courses taught by part-time faculty are significantly lower than those taught by full-time faculty
    - Just 20% of these courses are taught by full-time faculty

- Latinx students are three times more likely to fail English courses than their White counterparts
  - Across written communication courses:
    - Campus-X was more successful in supporting White students than Latinx students to successful course completion
    - The institution had greater success rates with Latinx students placed in courses with support vs. students placed in courses without support

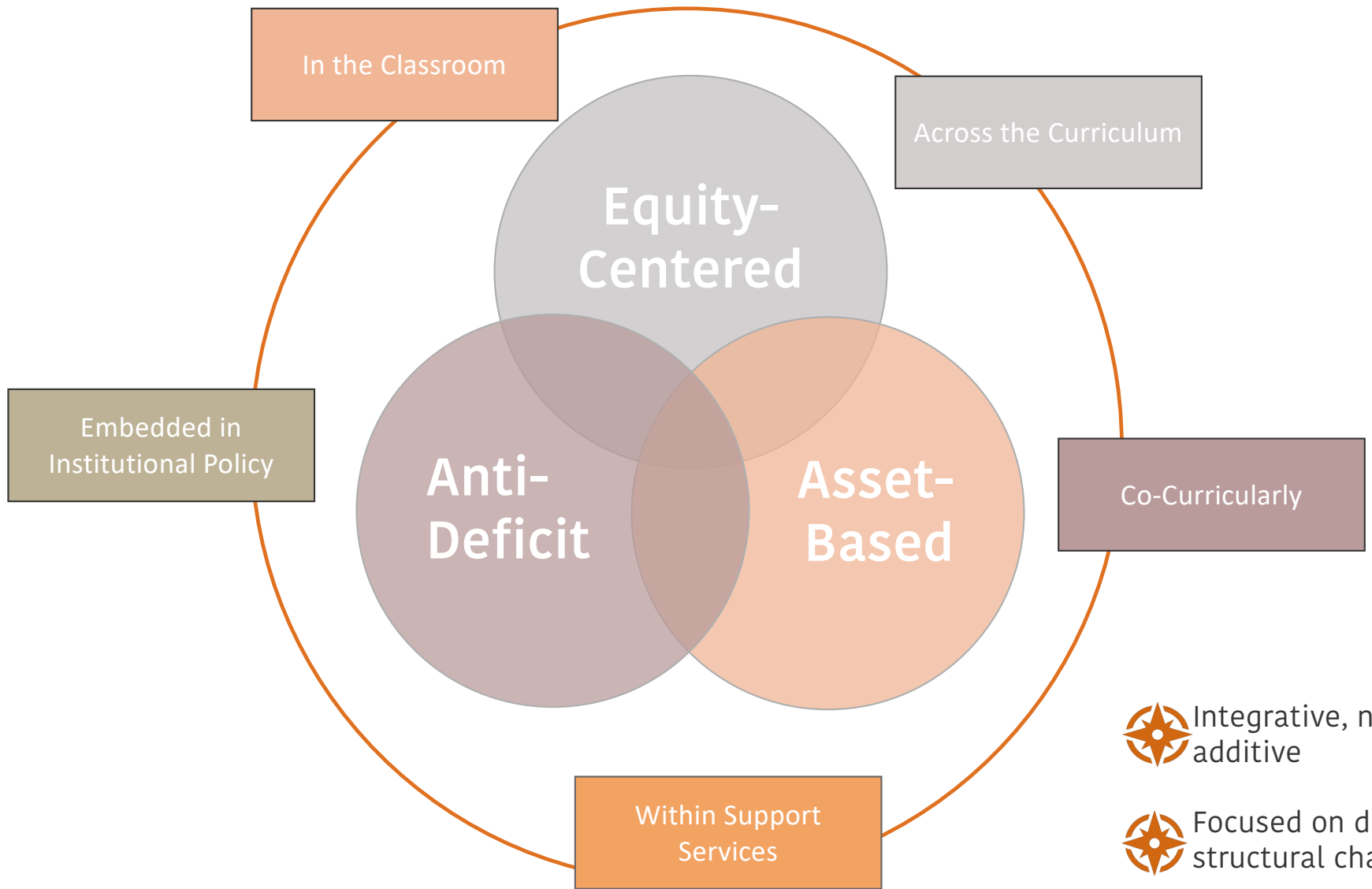# Anti-Deficit Approaches for Quant Data

Success Rate in Math 101

Anti-Deficit Approaches for Quant Data

Better Understanding Students in Math 101

Legend: African American Students, All Students

Category	Yes (African American)	Yes (All)	No (African American)	No (All)
Had a faculty member of the same racial background	46%	89%	54%	11%
Student met with advisor at least twice during semester	65%	71%	35%	29%
Course Taken As Part of Learning Community	53%	63%	47%	37%
Supplemental Instruction Provided	64%	41%	36%	59%
Course Taken at Main Campus	42%	74%	58%	26%
Adjunct Faculty Taught Course	87%	65%	13%	35%

Evolving our Deficit Lenses

Individually, Collectively, Institutionally

In the Classroom

Across the Curriculum

Embedded in Institutional Policy

Equity-Centered

Anti-Deficit

Asset-Based

Co-Curricularly

Within Support Services

Integrative, not additive

Focused on deep, structural change

Values & Assumptions: A Start

- exclusionary practices, institutional racism, and power asymmetries impact opportunities and outcomes for minoritized students

- unequal outcomes result from institution-based dysfunctions, not student characteristics

- we are responsible for student success

- all students are strong, capable, and can contribute to the learning environment

- marginalized students' experiences provide valuable insights into our own shortcomings

Relevant resources: "Equity-mindedness" (Bensimon, 2007), Anti-Deficit Achievement Framework (Harper, 2012)

Guidelines for Decision-Making Processes: A Start

- engage in equity through integrative, not additive, approaches
- ensure language, evaluation, and solutions center institutional responsibility
- make space for courageous conversations
- involve communities that are typically disserved by your institution

Collaborating to Address Deficit Lenses in Texas Higher Education

Group Discussion

Discussion Questions

Where and how do deficit lenses pose challenges to fulfilling your efforts towards equity on your campus?

What steps can you take through your role to addressing these challenges at your institution?

Discussion Guidelines

- For the conversation itself
  - Listen to understand
  - Engage respectfully – "step up, step back"
  - Stay centered on the questions posed
  - "Vegas rules", abridged
- Logistics
  - Notetaker to gather notes in shared document (link in Chat)
  - Facilitator to keep eye on time

Desiree D. Zerquera, PhD

ddzerquera@usfca.edu