

Equity vs equality

by SHERALYN ROMAN

Today I am interested in exploring the concept of equity, prompted by my recent experience helping complete my daughter's applications for University. For those of you with a young adult in Grade 12, you'll know what I mean. It's the time of year your child is super stressed about midterms, assignments, applying to schools, completing online assessment tools or entry exams for those schools, and/or also submitting supplementary applications for their specific program. All of this comes at a significant cost, which prompted the equity vs. equality debate in our house.

A quick search online* provides us a somewhat standard framework for understanding equity vs. equality. Equity and equality are two strategies we can use in an effort to produce fairness. Equity, the definition(s) state; is giving everyone what they need to be successful. Equality is about treating everyone the same. The problem with the principle of equality is that while it aims to promote fairness, it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same supports to be successful. More recently, we've also been reading and learning about justice, the idea that if systemic barriers supporting inequity are removed altogether, everyone will have access, entry to whatever it is they seek, without requiring supports or accommodations.

What does all this have to do with university applications? It's pretty simple and I am ashamed to say it (believing as I did that I was a strong advocate for equity) but it's something I never gave a second thought to until now. Perhaps you are the same? It has to do with equity of access to a system that requires an immediate outlay of cash to access it. I'm talking about OUAC, the Ontario Universities Application Centre. Any student who wishes to apply for higher education is required to submit their applications through the OUAC system. It's like an online clearing house for applications. For each school to which you apply there is a \$50 fee. Additionally, many universities require supplemental applications, exams or personal profile essays to be completed, also at a cost, sometimes a significant one. Just for logging in to the system, your base fee is \$150 and that covers up to three university applications. Every university application after that is an additional \$50/school. Supplemental documents often carry fees of \$85.00 to over \$200.00! All of this is before you ever set foot on campus and comes at a time of year that is often already stressful for many families the holiday season.

Our visa bill has taken a significant hit this month but what of the families without access to credit? Or - those young adults who are paying for school and therefore the application process, by themselves? If programs like OSAP (Ontario Student Assistance Program) exist to help ensure equitable access to a higher education, who helps provide access to the access point? I'm not sure a student, trying to maintain the grades required to be accepted to university, while also working a part-time job to facilitate getting there, has easy access to a supply of funds just to be able to APPLY to school in the first place. Even if a student, working part time, CAN afford the \$150 to apply they still don't have the same equity of access as a student with an unlimited source of income and can apply to as many schools as they wish. Their odds of acceptance, by virtue of money alone, are greatly increased.

I'm sure many of you were already painfully aware of the systemic barriers facing those attempting to better their future. I know it was the arrival of the holiday season that prompted a further examination of the cash flow both coming in to, and flowing out of our home. But at least there is some cash flow. (Does a credit line count as cash flow?) That said, equity of access to the system that helps guarantee future success is something we all need to start thinking more seriously about. Equity of access to some form of higher education serves us all. A brighter future comes from bright young minds being able to explore their full potential. All bright young minds that is.

*with various sources.