Community Co-design for Equity: A Framework to Advance Equity through Co-design in Municipalities and School Districts

Liam R. F. Bird / LRFB Equity Consulting, LLC / 3.3.2025

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1.0. ABOUT US

LRFB Equity Consulting LLC is a mission-driven firm committed to driving transformative change in education, government, and organizations by centering equity, belonging, and systemic impact. Founded by Liam R. F. Bird, LRFB employs a research-based, field-tested approach to help institutions address opportunity differences, dismantle systemic barriers, and co-create sustainable solutions that promote justice and inclusion.

Through strategic equity frameworks, policy reviews, professional learning, and community co-design, LRFB partners with schools, districts, and public institutions to develop actionable solutions tailored to the unique needs of those furthest from opportunity. Our work is grounded in targeted universalism, participatory action research, and culturally responsive leadership, ensuring that transformation is not just aspirational but measurable and lasting.

To learn more about our approach and ongoing initiatives, visit liambird.com.

1.1. INTRODUCTION
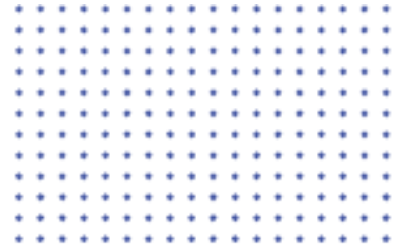
CO-DESIGN AS A METHODOLOGY AND STANCE

Co-design is both a methodology and a political stance—one rooted in historical struggles for racial and social justice. It emerges from resistance movements against white supremacy, fascism, patriarchy, and structural oppression, all of which have shaped global inequities for centuries (Crenshaw, 1989; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The work of co-design is the work of collective liberation, aiming to dismantle hierarchical decision-making structures, redistribute power, and establish community-centered governance (powell & Ake, 2021).

At its core, co-design is not simply about inclusion—it is about fundamentally transforming who holds power in shaping policies, practices, and institutional frameworks (Khalifa, 2018). It rejects top-down approaches in favor of community-led governance, ensuring that those most impacted by systemic inequities are the architects of solutions rather than passive participants in institutional decision-making.

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CO-DESIGN

This framework draws from the legacy of grassroots movements that operationalized community-led change through direct action, participatory democracy, and institutional disruption (Mills, 1959). From Ella Baker's decentralized leadership model to the Highlander Folk School's participatory organizing strategies, co-design as we understand it today has deep historical roots (Ransby, 2003).

The principles of co-design are evident in movements that have challenged structural inequities, including:
- The Civil Rights Movement, where organizations like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) engaged in community-led decision-making models that disrupted hierarchical governance structures (Ransby, 2003).
- Black Lives Matter, which operates through horizontal leadership and community-led policy advocacy, ensuring that those most impacted by state violence shape the movement's demands (Garza, 2014).
- Indigenous sovereignty efforts, which emphasize land stewardship, communal decision-making, and resistance to settler colonial governance structures (Tuck & Yang, 2012).
- Occupy Wall Street, which used radical participatory democracy to challenge corporate control of public policy and resource distribution (Graeber, 2013).

These movements provide critical lessons for institutional co-design efforts, demonstrating that real power-sharing requires institutions to not just consult communities but to restructure governance and decision-making mechanisms entirely (powell & Ake, 2021).

HOW TO USE THIS FRAMEWORK

This guide is designed for institutions—municipal governments, school districts, non-profits, and other entities—that seek to implement co-design processes to advance racial and social equity (Eubanks, 2018). It provides:

- A structured approach to co-design, grounded in theoretical frameworks and practical implementation strategies.
- Step-by-step methodologies for embedding co-design into institutional decision-making, ensuring that efforts move beyond short-term initiatives to long-term transformation.
- Case studies that illustrate the transformative potential of community-driven governance, demonstrating how co-design leads to more equitable, just, and sustainable institutional change (Howard, 2019).

Each section builds upon the last, ensuring that institutions engage in co-design intentionally, rigorously, and with full accountability to the communities they serve (Khalifa, 2018).

FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

This framework is divided into six key sections, each addressing a critical component of effective and justice-driven co-design:

1.2: Process Identification and Development

In co-design, clarity on the process being redesigned is essential. Whether focusing on a policy, strategic initiative, or institutional structure, this phase defines the scope of engagement and ensures alignment with equity-driven goals.Drawing from participatory action research and targeted universalism, this section establishes the foundations for an effective and inclusive co-design effort.

1.3: Equity Audit – Policy, Practice, and System Review

An equity audit serves as a diagnostic tool, examining policies, practices, and systems through a racial and socioeconomic lens (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This section details how institutions can conduct equity audits that reveal systemic barriers, using racial equity impact assessments, comparative municipal reviews, and participatory research methods. It also explores the curb-cut effect, demonstrating how policies designed for those furthest from opportunity lead to systemic improvements for all (Blackwell et al., 2017).

1.4: Community Co-Design Process and Engagement

This section focuses on the heart of co-design—authentic engagement with community stakeholders. It moves beyond superficial participation, outlining best practices for:

- Power-sharing in decision-making structures.
- Listening campaigns and empathy interviews to surface lived experiences.
- Participatory policy development that transfers power to impacted communities.

Drawing from historical organizing models and modern community-driven governance approaches, this section ensures that institutions center community epistemologies in decision-making (Yosso, 2005).

1.5: Implementation and Sustaining Equity Praxis

Co-design does not end once a solution is proposed—it must be integrated into institutional practice. This section focuses on:

- Embedding co-designed solutions into policy and institutional governance (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).
- Establishing accountability structures to sustain transformation (powell & Ake, 2021).
- Using culturally responsive school leadership frameworks to ensure co-design efforts remain embedded in organizational culture (Khalifa, 2018).

1.6: Measuring Impact and Iterative Equity Design

Co-design is an iterative process, requiring continuous assessment and adaptation (Eubanks, 2018). This final section focuses on:

- Measuring impact through both qualitative and quantitative methods (Sue, 2010).
- Ensuring policies and practices remain responsive to evolving community needs.
- Embedding long-term accountability structures within institutions to sustain co-design efforts.

By following these six phases, institutions can move beyond performative equity work and implement transformative co-design processes that address systemic inequities, build community trust, and redefine power structures. The appendices provide additional resources, including a full community co-design protocol, interview guides, and evaluation rubrics to support institutions in enacting meaningful and sustainable change.

GET STARTED

By following these six phases, institutions can move beyond performative equity work and implement transformative co-design processes that:

- Address systemic inequities at their root (Crenshaw, 1989).
- Build sustainable, trust-based relationships with impacted communities.
- Redefine power structures through equitable governance models (Khalifa, 2018).

The appendices provide additional resources, including a full community co-design protocol, interview guides, and evaluation rubrics, to support institutions in enacting meaningful and sustainable change.

1.2. CRITICAL SELF-REFLECTION IN AFFINITY AND ACROSS DIFFERENCE
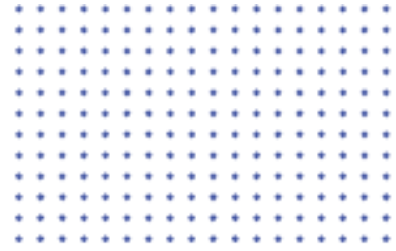
Self-reflection is a critical practice in equity-driven co-design, ensuring that institutions do not replicate the power dynamics, biases, and structural inequities they seek to dismantle. Without intentional, continuous reflection, co-design efforts risk becoming superficial exercises in inclusion rather than mechanisms for transformation (Howard, 2019). Institutions must recognize that they are not neutral entities—their policies, practices, and cultures are shaped by historical legacies of exclusion, privilege, and systemic inequity (Khalifa, 2018).

Self-reflection must be both individual and institutional, requiring structured opportunities to examine:
- How institutional policies have reinforced inequities over time
- The ways in which dominant cultural norms influence decision-making and resource allocation (Yosso, 2005).
- The shifts in power, practice, and accountability necessary for co-design to lead to systemic change rather than symbolic efforts.

This section explores self-reflection within identity-based affinity groups and across differences, ensuring that equity work is not merely reactionary but proactively dismantles systemic barriers (Sue, 2010).

KEY DIMENSIONS OF SELF-REFLECTION IN EQUITY-CENTERED CO-DESIGN

1. Self-Reflection as Institutional Accountability

Self-reflection must function as an accountability mechanism, ensuring that institutions move beyond performative equity statements toward structural change. This requires:
- Interrogating institutional history to uncover patterns of exclusion in policy, governance, and leadership (hooks, 2000).
- Assessing organizational culture and decision-making processes to determine where inequities persist and why they remain unchallenged (Sue, 2010).
- Establishing ongoing systems for internal critique, ensuring that institutions hold themselves accountable for their role in perpetuating inequities.

Without rigorous self-reflection, institutions risk incorporating community input into pre-existing structures rather than fundamentally reimagining those structures.

2. Self-Reflection in Affinity: Interrogating Power and Privilege

Affinity spaces allow individuals to engage in critical reflection with others who share similar identities, lived experiences, or institutional roles (Singleton, 2015). These spaces create conditions for:
- Examining privilege and internalized biases without placing an undue burden on those most impacted by systemic inequities to educate others.

- Developing counter-narratives that challenge dominant institutional perspectives, allowing for deeper analysis of systemic barriers (Howard, 2019).
- Building intra-group solidarity and responsibility, ensuring that individuals move from reflection to collective action that disrupts inequitable systems.

Without affinity-based self-reflection, institutional stakeholders may unintentionally replicate harm when engaging across difference, reinforcing rather than dismantling inequitable structures.

3. Self-Reflection Across Difference: Building Cross-Cultural Competency

While affinity spaces allow for critical intra-group reflection, co-design also requires engagement across lines of difference, where institutional leaders must:
- Develop cultural humility, understanding that equity work requires unlearning dominant knowledge systems and embracing multiple ways of knowing.
- Engage in constructivist listening, ensuring that cross-racial and cross-cultural dialogues do not reinforce dominant perspectives but instead center the voices of those most impacted by inequity (Singleton, 2015).
- Acknowledge institutional blind spots, ensuring that co-design is not merely an advisory process, but one that transfers power to historically excluded communities.

Institutions that fail to engage in self-reflection across differences risk creating co-design processes that reproduce institutional hierarchies rather than challenging them.

SELF-REFLECTION AS A PRECURSOR TO INSTITUTIONAL TRANSFORMATION

1. Embedding Self-Reflection into Institutional Practices

For self-reflection to produce systemic change, institutions must:
- Integrate self-reflection into leadership development and strategic planning (Howard, 2019).
- Develop institutional accountability structures that require ongoing reflection and transparency (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).
- Create mechanisms for tracking shifts in awareness, policy, and culture to ensure that reflection translates into action (Yosso, 2005).

2. Measuring the Impact of Self-Reflection on Institutional Change

Self-reflection must lead to measurable institutional transformation rather than remaining an intellectual exercise. This requires:
- Moving from reflection to policy and practice intervention that disrupts inequitable systems (Khalifa, 2018).
- Establishing benchmarks for how self-reflection informs co-design efforts, ensuring that learning translates into structural shifts.
- Embedding self-reflection in governance structures, ensuring that it is not limited to individuals but becomes an institutionalized practice (Singleton, 2015).

COMMON PITFALLS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

Many institutions engage in surface-level self-reflection that fails to translate into meaningful transformation. Common pitfalls include:
- Framing self-reflection as an individual exercise rather than an institutional accountability process (Howard, 2019).
- Using self-reflection to manage institutional discomfort rather than drive systemic change.
- Engaging in reflection without establishing mechanisms for measuring its impact on policy and practice.

By addressing these pitfalls early, institutions ensure that self-reflection strengthens co-design rather than becoming an isolated practice (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

CONNECTING SELF-REFLECTION TO INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKS AND CONTINUOUS EQUITY WORK

Institutions that commit to ongoing self-reflection often integrate frameworks from established equity-focused organizations, such as:
- San Francisco Coalition of Essential Small Schools (SF-CESS), which emphasizes equity-based inquiry and self-reflective practices within educational institutions (SF-CESS, 2021).
- The Center for Leadership and Equity Education (CLEE), which supports professional learning for equity-focused leadership development (CLEE, 2020).
- The Network for College Success, which advances continuous improvement models that embed equity-centered self-reflection into institutional decision-making (NCS, 2019).

These networks demonstrate that self-reflection must be systematic and continuous, rather than episodic or symbolic (Khalifa, 2018).

## CONCLUSION: SELF-REFLECTION AS THE ETHICAL FOUNDATION FOR CO-DESIGN

Self-reflection is not an optional prelude to co-design—it is an ethical imperative that ensures the integrity of equity work. Without:
- Deep interrogation of institutional power and history (hooks, 2000).
- Sustained reflection in affinity and across difference.
- Mechanisms for ensuring reflection leads to institutional change (powell & Ake, 2021).

"…co-design risks becoming an exercise in symbolic inclusion rather than structural transformation" (Howard, 2019).

By committing to rigorous, equity-centered self-reflection, institutions create the necessary conditions for co-design processes that dismantle, rather than reinforce, systemic inequities.

1.3. PROCESS IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT
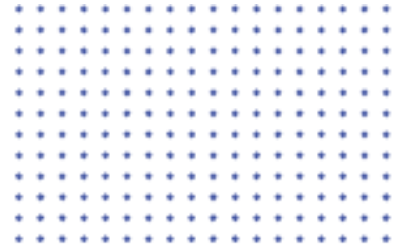
The process of co-design begins with a clear identification of the system, policy, or initiative that requires transformation. Institutions often recognize the need for equity-driven change but lack a structured approach to defining the scope of their efforts.This phase ensures that co-design is intentional, data-driven, and informed by those most impacted by systemic inequities (powell & Ake, 2021).

DEFINING THE PROBLEM AND THE PROCESS TO BE REDESIGNED

Institutions must first determine what specific policy, practice, or system they are addressing. This requires an analysis of existing disparities, historical context, and institutional priorities (hooks, 2000). Many policies and structures were not designed with equity in mind, instead reinforcing historical patterns of exclusion and resource hoarding (Eubanks, 2018). Critical Race Theory (CRT) provides a lens for understanding how policies and systems have been shaped by racial inequities and how those inequities must be actively disrupted (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

The CPS Equity Framework provides an example of structured inquiry for process identification, posing guiding questions such as: "Who has a seat at the table in decision-making, and are they included as co-designers?" and "How do we design universal strategies that meet the needs of those furthest from opportunity?" . This structured approach ensures that institutions move beyond vague commitments to equity and instead focus on specific, targeted policy redesigns.

ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS IN PROCESS DEVELOPMENT

Process identification must be informed by a diverse range of voices, particularly those who have historically been excluded from institutional decision-making.This includes students, families, frontline staff, and community advocates, ensuring that co-design is responsive to lived experiences rather than imposed from the top down.

One best practice for authentic stakeholder engagement comes from the Family Leadership Design Collaborative (FLDC), which partners directly with families and communities to co-design education policies. Their process begins with communities articulating their own priorities, rather than reacting to institutional agendas, ensuring that co-design is driven by those most impacted. Similarly, research on participatory democracy emphasizes that institutional leaders must recognize community epistemology as valid expertise (Sue, 2010).

MAPPING INSTITUTIONAL READINESS AND BARRIERS

Co-design efforts require a certain level of organizational coherence. Institutions must assess their readiness for equity-driven transformation by examining:

- **Existing policies**—Are they aligned with targeted universalism and anti-racist principles?
- **Leadership alignment**—Is there buy-in from decision-makers, or is resistance expected?
- **Potential obstacles**—Where might bureaucratic inertia or resistance arise?

Research highlights that institutions often fail in co-design because they underestimate internal barriers (Eubanks, 2018). bell hooks emphasized that without intentional action, institutions will continue to favor dominant groups due to longstanding biases baked into 'standard' practices (hooks, 2000). To avoid performative efforts, institutions must embed equity as a non-negotiable in their strategic goals and policy review processes.

Once the process for co-design has been identified, institutions must develop a structured plan that includes clear objectives, timelines, and engagement strategies. This ensures that co-design does not become an abstract concept but is operationalized in a way that leads to concrete institutional change.

DEVELOPING A CO-DESIGN PLAN

Once the process for co-design has been identified, institutions must develop a structured plan that includes clear objectives, timelines, and engagement strategies (Howard, 2019). This ensures that co-design does not remain an abstract concept but is operationalized into concrete institutional change (powell & Ake, 2021).

Key elements of a co-design plan include:
- Establishing a Co-Design Team—A cross-functional team that includes internal and external stakeholders with decision-making power.
- Creating Transparency and Accountability Structures—Equity councils, advisory boards, and participatory budgeting processes must hold institutions accountable for implementation (Eubanks, 2018).
- Using Data to Inform Co-Design—Institutions must integrate quantitative and qualitative data in process development. This includes disaggregated data on racial disparities and community narratives collected through listening campaigns and empathy interviews.

COMMON PITFALLS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

Many institutions approach co-design with good intentions but fail to structure the process in a way that leads to meaningful change (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Common pitfalls include:
- Engaging stakeholders too late in the process, after key decisions have already been made (Khalifa, 2018).
- Treating co-design as a one-time initiative, rather than an ongoing institutional commitment (Sue, 2010).
- Failing to establish clear accountability mechanisms to ensure transparency and follow-through (Eubanks, 2018).
- Centering institutional needs rather than prioritizing the voices and expertise of those most impacted by inequity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

By addressing these challenges early in the process, institutions can create a co-design framework that is rigorous, inclusive, and oriented toward long-term transformation (powell & Ake, 2021).

CONCLUSION

Process identification and development lay the groundwork for effective co-design (Howard, 2019). Without a clear understanding of the problem, institutional readiness, and stakeholder engagement strategies, co-design efforts risk becoming superficial exercises in inclusion rather than meaningful structural change (Eubanks, 2018).

This section has provided a roadmap for institutions to ensure that their co-design work is intentional, data-driven, and aligned with the needs of those furthest from opportunity (powell & Ake, 2021). The next phase—equity auditing—builds upon this foundation, offering tools for analyzing policies and practices through an equity lens (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

1.4. EQUITY AUDIT – POLICY, PRACTICE, AND SYSTEM REVIEW
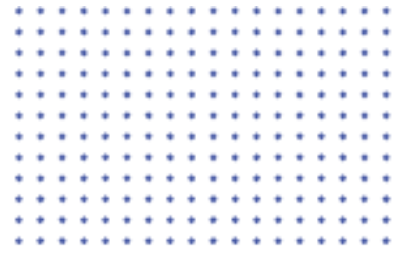
An equity audit serves as a structured analysis of policies, practices, and systems to determine how they contribute to or disrupt systemic inequities. This process is critical in ensuring that institutions move beyond performative equity efforts and instead commit to structural change that centers those furthest from opportunity (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). An effective equity audit is not just a diagnostic tool—it is a foundation for co-design, providing the data and insights needed to drive meaningful transformation (powell & Ake, 2021). Institutions often conduct reviews of their policies and programs, but without a structured, equity-focused audit, these efforts frequently fail to address the root causes of disparities (Eubanks, 2018). An equity audit ensures that institutions use data, stakeholder input, and critical analysis to assess the extent to which their policies and practices contribute to or mitigate inequity (Yosso, 2005).

This section outlines the methodology of equity audits, with a focus on racial and socioeconomic indicators, policy impact, and institutional accountability. Rooted in targeted universalism, Critical Race Theory (CRT), and participatory action research, an equity audit ensures that co-design efforts are informed by a deep understanding of historical inequities and current institutional barriers (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Without these frameworks, institutions risk reinforcing existing inequities rather than dismantling them.

KEY COMPONENTS OF AN EQUITY AUDIT

Comparative Policy and Practice Review
Institutions must critically analyze their policies and practices to assess their impact on different communities. This includes reviewing formal policies, informal practices, and historical decision-making patterns (Howard, 2019). The goal is to identify policies that reinforce racial, economic, and social inequities and to determine how these can be restructured through co-design (Khalifa, 2018). Many institutions inadvertently maintain inequities by failing to question policies that appear neutral but disproportionately harm communities of color, low-income populations, and those with disabilities. A comparative policy review examines whether policies:
- Reinforce or disrupt racial and economic disparities.
- Uphold systemic barriers to access and opportunity.
- Promote inclusive decision-making or merely provide symbolic representation.

Disaggregated Data Analysis
An equity audit requires the use of both qualitative and quantitative data to assess disparities. Data should be disaggregated by race, income, gender, disability status, and other key identity markers to reveal patterns of exclusion (Eubanks, 2018). Institutions should assess disparities in access, outcomes, and resource allocation to determine who is most impacted by systemic inequities. Simply aggregating data often masks inequities and allows disparities to persist unchecked (Howard, 2019). A robust data analysis includes:
- Outcome disparities by race, socioeconomic status, and other demographic factors.
- Assessment of how institutional policies influence these disparities (Yosso, 2005).
- Evaluation of whether resources are equitably allocated based on community need.

Listening Campaigns and Community Input

Equity audits must be informed by the voices of those directly impacted (Howard, 2019). Listening campaigns, focus groups, and empathy interviews allow institutions to capture community narratives that may not be reflected in numerical data. These qualitative insights help shape a more complete picture of institutional inequities and opportunities for co-design (Eubanks, 2018). Without directly engaging impacted communities, institutions risk developing solutions that fail to address the root causes of inequity (hooks, 2000). Effective community engagement should:

- Prioritize the leadership of those most impacted by inequities.
- Use storytelling and lived experience as key data points.
- Ensure that listening campaigns translate into policy and practice changes.

Policy Impact Assessment Using the Curb-Cut Effect

The curb-cut effect suggests that designing policies to benefit those with the most barriers leads to broader benefits for everyone (Blackwell et al., 2017). Equity audits should assess whether institutional policies and practices follow this principle—prioritizing those furthest from opportunity while creating systemic improvements for all stakeholders. For example, policies that improve language accessibility for non-English speakers also benefit those with literacy challenges and create more inclusive communication systems overall (Eubanks, 2018). Institutions should analyze:

- Who benefits most directly from current policies, and who remains excluded.
- Whether policies that address the needs of marginalized groups result in broader social improvements.
- How policy changes can be designed to create long-term systemic benefits for all communities (Howard, 2019).

STEPS IN CONDUCTING AN EQUITY AUDIT

Step 1: Define the Scope of the Audit

Institutions must first determine which policies, practices, or systems will be analyzed (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This includes setting clear research questions, determining key indicators of inequity, and establishing accountability structures for the audit process (powell & Ake, 2021).

Step 2: Gather and Analyze Data

An equity audit should include both internal institutional data and external community feedback (Howard, 2019). Institutions should collect:

- Disaggregated demographic and outcome data.
- Policy documents, historical decisions, and budget allocations.
- Narratives from those most impacted by inequity through listening campaigns.

Step 3: Identify Structural Barriers and Patterns

Once data has been collected, institutions should look for patterns of inequity. These may include disparities in service delivery, resource allocation, hiring and promotion practices, or community engagement strategies (Khalifa, 2018). Identifying these barriers is the first step in co-designing solutions.

Step 4: Develop Recommendations for Co-Design

The findings of an equity audit should lead directly into co-design efforts (Howard, 2019). Institutions must engage impacted communities in developing solutions that address the barriers identified (hooks, 2000). These recommendations should be structured to ensure transparency, accountability, and sustainability.

INSTITUTIONAL RESISTANCE AND HOW TO ADDRESS IT

Equity audits often surface resistance within institutions, particularly when findings challenge long-standing policies and power structures (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Common forms of resistance include:

- Defensive responses from leadership and staff when confronted with inequitable outcomes.
- Bureaucratic delays that slow down or block policy changes.
- Attempts to dilute or neutralize equity recommendations to avoid discomfort.
- Framing equity work as an optional initiative rather than a core institutional responsibility.

To address resistance, institutions must establish clear accountability mechanisms. This includes public reporting of audit findings, embedding equity goals into institutional performance metrics, and ensuring that those most impacted by inequities lead the process of redesign.

FROM EQUITY AUDIT TO ACTION

An equity audit is not just a report—it is a call to action (hooks, 2000). Institutions must move beyond diagnosing problems to implementing co-designed solutions. The findings of an equity audit should directly inform policy development, budget allocation, and strategic planning. By engaging in a rigorous and transparent equity audit process, institutions can lay the groundwork for systemic transformation. The next phase—Community Co-Design—builds upon these findings, ensuring that those most impacted by inequity lead the process of redesigning policies and practices to create more just and equitable systems.

1.5. IMPLEMENTING AND SUSTAINING EQUITY PRAXIS
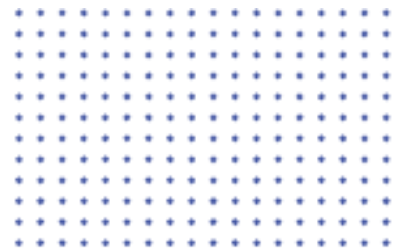
Equity work cannot be a one-time initiative, a compliance exercise, or a leadership talking point. It must be embedded into the DNA of an institution, shaping its governance, policies, and culture in ways that cannot be easily undone. Implementation is where co-design either takes root or falls apart. Sustaining equity praxis means that the work does not end once a policy is written or a strategy is developed—it requires long-term commitment, accountability, and a willingness to continuously iterate and adapt.

This chapter outlines the critical steps in moving from co-design to full-scale institutional adoption and sustainability. It ensures that co-design does not remain an abstract concept but instead becomes a structured, ongoing process that transforms how institutions function.

FROM CO-DESIGN TO INSTITUTIONALIZATION

One of the biggest failures of equity initiatives is their tendency to remain episodic—high-energy rollouts followed by a slow fade into institutional inertia. This happens when equity work is treated as a special project rather than a core governance function. True implementation means shifting equity from an external effort to an embedded practice that institutions are structurally accountable for.

To make this shift, institutions must:

Integrate Equity Into Governance Structures
- Equity must be written into policy—not as an appendix, but as a fundamental part of governance and decision-making structures. This includes ensuring that co-designed policies and initiatives become standing items in leadership meetings, strategic plans, and budget allocations.
- Equity councils or advisory bodies must have real decision-making power, not just be symbolic spaces for feedback.

Make Equity Non-Negotiable in Institutional Planning
- Every major initiative—whether it be budgeting, hiring, curriculum, or urban planning—must be reviewed through an equity lens. This is not about adding an "equity check" at the end of the process but embedding it from the beginning.
- Institutions must adopt an iterative equity review process that ensures policies are not only assessed for impact but continuously refined based on new data and community feedback.

Hold Leadership Accountable

- Leadership buy-in is critical, but buy-in is not enough. Leaders must be held accountable for enacting the changes that come from co-design. This includes setting measurable equity goals tied to leadership evaluations and requiring transparency in how decisions align with equity commitments.
- Leadership accountability also means shifting from performative allyship to tangible action—allocating resources, changing policies, and removing barriers that reinforce inequities.

BUILDING CAPACITY FOR SUSTAINED EQUITY WORK

Institutions cannot rely on a single equity leader or office to carry the burden of transformation. Co-design must become an institution-wide competency, with all staff understanding their role in sustaining the work. This requires:

Training and Professional Development
- Equity training cannot be a one-time workshop. It must be an ongoing practice, integrated into leadership development, new employee onboarding, and continuous learning structures.
- Training must move beyond surface-level DEI awareness and instead focus on deep competency-building, including power analysis, policy review, and culturally responsive decision-making.

Embedding Equity in Data and Evaluation
- Institutions must develop systems for measuring equity progress, including both qualitative and quantitative measures. This means disaggregating data to track disparities, conducting community audits, and ensuring data collection aligns with the lived realities of those most impacted.
- Evaluating equity impact requires shifting from static reporting to dynamic learning, ensuring that institutions do not simply track numbers but actually use data to drive continuous improvement.

Creating Spaces for Reflexivity and Learning
- Self-reflection must be embedded at every level of the institution. This includes structured opportunities for leaders, staff, and stakeholders to assess how they are contributing to or resisting systemic change.
- Institutions should build in mechanisms for feedback that allow for real-time adjustments, ensuring that equity efforts remain responsive and do not become rigid or disconnected from community needs.

SUSTAINING CO-DESIGN OVER TIME

For co-design to be truly sustainable, institutions must recognize that it is an ongoing, evolving process. This requires:

Regular Review and Recommitment
- Institutions must schedule formal equity reassessments—every 6 months, annually, and in alignment with major policy updates. This prevents stagnation and ensures that co-designed solutions are adapting to emerging challenges and needs.
- Just as financial and operational audits are standard practice, equity audits must become routine, with findings directly impacting institutional priorities.

Long-Term Resource Allocation
- Equity work cannot survive without funding. Institutions must build equity into core budgeting processes, ensuring that it is not dependent on grants or temporary funding cycles.

- Hiring and staffing structures must reflect long-term investment, with dedicated roles for equity leadership that have institutional authority and are not easily eliminated when leadership changes.

Embedding Community Accountability Structures
- Community co-design does not end when an initiative is implemented. Institutions must maintain mechanisms for ongoing engagement, ensuring that those most impacted by policies continue to shape how they evolve.
- Participatory budgeting, community-led review committees, and regular public reporting must be built into governance, reinforcing that equity work is not just an internal institutional priority but a public commitment.

EQUITY AS PRAXIS, NOT A PROJECT

Sustaining equity requires a fundamental shift in institutional culture—moving from treating equity as an initiative to embedding it as a governing principle. Institutions must commit to:
- Making equity work a core governance function, not a separate program (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).
- Embedding self-reflection and adaptation into institutional practice.
- Ensuring accountability structures remain intact, regardless of leadership changes (powell & Ake, 2021).

This is how institutions move from performative commitments to lasting transformation.

This is how we win.

1.6. COMMUNITY CO-DESIGN PROCESS AND ENGAGEMENT
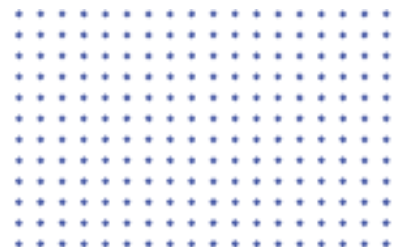
At the heart of equity transformation is the community co-design process—where those most impacted by institutional decisions take the lead in shaping policies, programs, and systemic changes. Co-design is not about consultation or advisory roles—it is about shifting power to ensure that communities define the challenges, develop the solutions, and retain agency over institutional decision-making. The community co-design process is grounded in historical and contemporary resistance movements, from the civil rights era's participatory democracy models to more recent examples such as Black Lives Matter and Indigenous-led sovereignty initiatives (Ransby, 2003). This section outlines best practices in community co-design, strategies for power redistribution, and the importance of ensuring that those furthest from opportunity remain at the center of all decision-making (powell & Ake, 2021).

KEY TAKEAWAYS INCLUDE:

Centering Community Epistemology
- Historically, institutions have relied on external expertise and academic knowledge to inform decision-making, often dismissing the knowledge and lived experiences of the communities they serve (Yosso, 2005). Community epistemology acknowledges that those directly impacted by systemic inequities are the true experts and must drive the co-design process (Khalifa, 2018).

Ensuring Transparency and Power Redistribution
- Co-design requires institutions to relinquish control and embed transparency into all aspects of decision-making (Howard, 2019). This includes co-creating governance structures, setting clear expectations around accountability, and ensuring that institutional leaders do not override or dilute community-driven solutions (Sue, 2010).

Prioritizing Those Furthest from Opportunity
- Using targeted universalism, co-design must begin with those who face the greatest systemic barriers (powell & Ake, 2021). Rather than developing broad solutions that fail to address disparities, institutions must focus on redesigning systems in ways that prioritize those most impacted, knowing that equitable systems ultimately benefit all stakeholders (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

STEPS IN THE CO-DESIGN PROCESS

Step 1: Establish Trust and Credibility
Successful co-design requires a foundation of trust between institutions and the communities they serve. This means acknowledging past harms, ensuring transparency in decision-making, and demonstrating a commitment to meaningful change (hooks, 2000).

Step 2: Implement Listening Campaigns
Listening campaigns are structured processes that allow communities to articulate their needs, challenges, and priorities. Unlike traditional surveys or institutional town halls, listening campaigns are designed to be interactive, community-led, and rooted in the principles of participatory democracy (Garza, 2014). These campaigns should be conducted in culturally responsive ways, ensuring that language accessibility, community history, and local customs are respected.

Step 3: Co-Develop Policy and Programmatic Solutions
Once the listening campaign has gathered critical insights, institutions must ensure that the solutions generated are developed in collaboration with the community. This requires participatory policy drafting, collaborative budget planning, and co-created implementation plans.

Step 4: Institutionalize Accountability Structures
One of the most significant failures in institutional equity efforts is the lack of sustained accountability. Institutions must create structures such as community advisory councils, independent equity commissions, and ongoing participatory budgeting initiatives to ensure that co-design is not a one-time event but an embedded practice.

THE CURB-CUT EFFECT AND COMMUNITY CO-DESIGN

The curb-cut effect demonstrates how policies designed for specific communities with particular needs ultimately create broader social benefits (Blackwell et al., 2017). This principle must be embedded in co-design efforts, ensuring that solutions are not just reactive fixes but proactive redesigns that improve accessibility and equity for all. For example, community co-design of urban infrastructure—such as accessible sidewalks, public transportation, and green spaces—does not only benefit disabled individuals but enhances public space for all residents (Eubanks, 2018). The same principle applies to educational policies, workplace equity, and social service design.

CHALLENGES IN COMMUNITY CO-DESIGN AND HOW TO ADDRESS THEM

While co-design is a powerful tool for equity transformation, institutions often struggle with implementation. Common challenges include:
- Institutional resistance to shifting power and decision-making authority.
- The risk of co-opting or diluting community-generated solutions to fit pre-existing institutional goals.
- Insufficient investment in long-term co-design efforts, leading to short-term, superficial engagement.
- The tendency to prioritize efficiency over relational trust-building, leading to disengagement from community stakeholders (Sue, 2010).

Addressing these challenges requires institutions to approach co-design with humility, accountability, and a commitment to sustained transformation. Institutions must recognize that co-design is not a linear process but an ongoing commitment to disrupting inequitable systems and centering community-led governance (hooks, 2000).

CONCLUSION

The community co-design process is the most critical phase in ensuring that equity transformation is authentic, sustainable, and impactful. Institutions must go beyond symbolic gestures of inclusion and fully commit to redistributing power, resources, and decision-making authority. This section has outlined the key principles, steps, and challenges in community co-design, providing institutions with the tools to engage in meaningful, justice-driven transformation.

The next phase—Implementation and Sustaining Equity Praxis—focuses on embedding co-designed solutions into institutional policy and practice, ensuring long-term accountability and structural change.

1.7. MEASURING IMPACT AND ITERATIVE EQUITY DESIGN
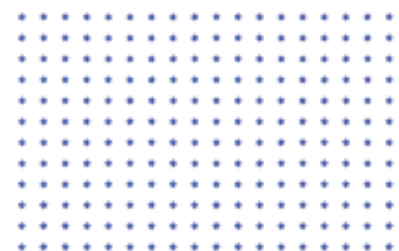
Co-design is an ongoing process, not a one-time initiative. Institutions must commit to continuously measuring the impact of co-designed solutions and making iterative improvements based on data, feedback, and evolving community needs (Howard, 2019). Too often, equity work is treated as static, failing to adapt to changing realities or to address unintended consequences. To sustain meaningful institutional transformation, co-design must be embedded within continuous evaluation and redesign processes (powell & Ake, 2021).

Measuring impact requires both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Traditional key performance indicators (KPIs) may not fully capture the systemic impact of co-design, particularly in addressing inequities (Yosso, 2005). Institutions must adopt community-defined success metrics, participatory research methodologies, and real-time adaptation based on lived experiences.

KEY APPROACHES TO MEASURING IMPACT

Establishing Equity-Focused Metrics
Traditional performance measures often fail to account for the realities of those most impacted by inequities. Institutions must define success through an equity lens, incorporating community-defined indicators that measure inclusivity, accessibility, and systemic change (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Examples of equity-focused metrics include:
- Disaggregated outcome data assessing racial, economic, and gender disparities.
- Community satisfaction measures tied to co-designed policy implementation.
- Institutional accountability metrics, such as leadership representation and participatory budgeting impact.

Using Participatory Action Research (PAR)
Participatory Action Research (PAR) ensures that communities are not just subjects of evaluation but active co-creators of knowledge (Tuck & Yang, 2012). PAR methods include focus groups, storytelling, and collective data analysis, ensuring that impact measurement remains community-driven rather than top-down.

Conducting Six-Month and One-Year Impact Reviews
Institutions must commit to regular impact assessments that go beyond compliance-based reporting. Six-month and one-year reviews allow for real-time adjustments, ensuring that co-designed policies and practices remain effective and responsive to community needs (Khalifa, 2018).

The Role of Iterative Equity Design
Equity work is cyclical. No single policy or initiative will completely eliminate systemic barriers. Iterative equity design ensures that institutions remain responsive, continuously improving and refining their approaches based on real-world outcomes and shifting community priorities (powell & Ake, 2021).

Embedding Continuous Feedback Loops

Feedback must be institutionalized rather than treated as an occasional check-in (Howard, 2019). Establishing formal channels for ongoing community input—including advisory councils, digital engagement platforms, and public accountability sessions—ensures that co-design remains dynamic and evolving.

Addressing Unintended Consequences

Even well-intentioned equity initiatives can have unintended negative consequences if they are not continuously evaluated. Institutions must proactively identify and mitigate potential harm by incorporating community feedback into iterative redesign efforts (Sue, 2010).

Centering Discourse 1 and Discourse 2 Approaches

Eubanks, Parish, and Smith (2009) distinguish between Discourse 1—technical compliance-driven approaches to equity—and Discourse 2, which focuses on disrupting power structures and challenging institutionalized inequities. Effective iterative design ensures that institutions engage in both—meeting technical benchmarks while also fundamentally reimagining how equity is operationalized.

INSTITUTIONALIZING ITERATIVE EQUITY DESIGN

Sustaining co-design over time requires institutions to embed iterative equity design into their strategic planning processes (Khalifa, 2018). This includes:
- Integrating equity impact assessments into all major policy decisions.
- Establishing a permanent co-design infrastructure, such as dedicated equity offices or participatory governance models.
- Allocating funding to ensure continuous evaluation and adaptation of co-designed policies and programs.

CONCLUSION

Measuring impact and engaging in iterative equity design are essential to sustaining meaningful institutional change (Howard, 2019). Without ongoing assessment and adaptation, co-designed solutions risk becoming stagnant or ineffective over time. By embedding continuous learning, accountability, and responsiveness into their equity strategies, institutions can ensure that co-design remains a transformative force for justice and systemic change.

This section concludes the structured framework for community co-design. The appendices provide additional tools, including sample community co-design protocols, listening campaign guides, and equity audit frameworks to support institutions in deepening their commitment to equity-driven transformation.

1.8. WORK CITED
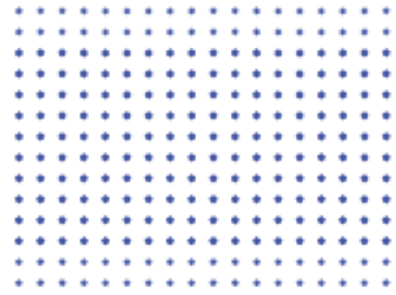
The following sources provide the theoretical foundations, historical context, and methodological approaches that inform this community co-design framework. The bibliography includes key works on Critical Race Theory, targeted universalism, culturally responsive leadership, participatory action research, and systemic equity transformation.

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22. Participatory Action Research (PAR): Collaborative inquiry model prioritizing community leadership in research.
23. Targeted Universalism (powell, 2012): Policy framework ensuring equitable outcomes by addressing the needs of those furthest from opportunity.
24. Curb-Cut Effect (Blackwell, 2017): Demonstrating how policies designed for specific marginalized groups lead to broader societal benefits.
25. Critical Race Theory (CRT): Framework for analyzing how legal and policy structures uphold systemic inequities.
26. Motivational Interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 2013): Technique for fostering equity-centered organizational change.

This bibliography provides foundational sources for understanding the historical, theoretical, and applied aspects of community co-design. By engaging with these works, institutions can deepen their commitment to equity-driven transformation and ensure that their co-design efforts remain rooted in justice, accountability, and systemic change.