

Narrative Report

Introduction

President Biden set the tone of his administration by signing Executive Order 13895, which aims to advance equity throughout all facets of the federal government (2021). While equity advocates praised President Biden for defining his first day with this promise, many expressed the need for each federal agency to construct aggressive equitable policy reform rather than the diluted policy we often see. We analyzed the Equity Action Plans of the Department of Education (DOE), Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), and the Department of Defense (DOD), evaluating how each defined equity and represented problems within their agency. Through coding and analysis, we found the depth of action plans varied significantly across Departments. Some employed typical language used in the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) realm, while others historically centered equity within the agency and outlined actionable steps. Ultimately, all three agencies lacked the aggressive policy language we were desiring to see and have room for improvement.

Department of Education

Since the unanimous ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Department of Education (DOE) has had the opportunity and responsibility to secure equal access to high-quality education. At the onset of their action plan, DOE recognizes that to fulfill the promise of education, they must assess and reform the enduring disparities. DOE defines equity as securing equal access to educational opportunities and excellence for all students, recognizing the need to look inward at its processes, policies, strategies, and culture to advance equity within policy. The Department developed five action items to obtain the progression of equity: establishing more substantial college access and completion initiatives to reduce barriers to higher education for underserved populations, ensuring funds allocated from the American Rescue Plan are employed to help students disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, restoring data collected by the Department's Office for Civil Rights that was overhauled by the Trump administration, adjusting its contracting and procurement processes, and implementing new strategies to establish a more equitable grant award process.

Of the plans we analyzed, the DOE's was the most substantial. Each action item incorporated a recognitional element, explicitly naming the fundamental right to education and affirming claims of race and class barriers that have barred many students, educators, and institutions from opportunities. Since the agency actively chose to situate its plan within the larger historical context, the overall action plan felt whole and more attainable than its DOD and VA counterparts, which failed to recognize past injustices resulting in their action plans' performative appearance. Each action item in the DOE's plan held a procedural dimension, with some action items providing more significant feedback opportunities and others transferring authority to marginalized communities. The Department also explicitly cited numerous

stakeholder engagement events they held to amplify communities lacking traditional access to the agency and its leadership. Their final action item stated a commitment to increasing the diversity of peer reviewers, revising the current application process utilizing feedback from stakeholders, and making a concerted effort to include underrepresented voices at the inception of the grant process.

Analyzing how the DOE characterizes problems, it was evident that the agency often adjudicates issues as a combination of marginalized communities being excluded from policymaking and outside factors exacerbating this disparity. Each action item conveyed the Department's belief that higher education is necessary to achieve socioeconomic mobility in the United States. Despite this, the DOE missed an opportunity to propose tuition-free college, a move which would greatly increase equity, instead opting to rely on adjusting existing initiatives like FAFSA and the Pell Grant and employing generic terms to construct the targeted population. Consistent usage of terms like "disadvantaged individuals" and "under-resourced colleges" rather than naming disparities within subsection populations (i.g. HBCUs, TCUs, MSIs, PBIs, HSIs, AANAPISI, ANNHs, and NASNTIs) suggest the Department views existing gaps through a macro lens.

While the Department established an actionable plan, its failure to critique its culture and outline remedies to internally address the representation within the agency itself stands in the way of being able to successfully advance equitable policy externally. It is safe to assume that only college-educated individuals were included in authoring and developing the plan, presenting a perspective much different from the marginalized voices who experience the disparities discussed. Moving forward, the agency should collaborate with these individuals to gather the full scope of the factors responsible for existing inequitable practices.

Department of Veterans' Affairs

Looking at the Equity Action Plan publicized by the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) it is immediately noticeable that the Department has other issues on their priority list ahead of actionable initiatives to achieve true equity. Visually, the plan's structure is informal, there is no VA branding or insignia and the instructions and deadline for submission have been left in the document. Regarding content, the VA exhibits the traditional "compliance" language used by organizations who recognize the need to adapt their public-facing policies to maintain good reputations in the public eye. In reality, however, this tactic is usually accompanied by executive leadership with little to no intention of devoting the time and resources necessary at the internal level to execute actionable steps to achieve true equity.

Nonetheless, the Department does offer an explicit definition of what equity means to them: a Department who "intentionally commits to consistent and systematic fair, just and impartial treatment of all individuals and a just distribution of tools and resources to give Veterans, including Women Veterans, LGBTQ+ Veterans, Black American Veterans, Tribal Veterans, Pacific Islander Veterans, among other underserved communities, what is required to enjoy a full, healthy life." However, when naming their top three priorities, there is no explicit

mention of focusing resources on the aforementioned underserved communities. Instead, the VA makes generalizations, writing “Veterans and their families,” effectively absolving themselves of the responsibility to carry out initiatives specifically targeted to subgroups disproportionately affected by current practices and straying from the spirit behind White House Executive Order 13985.

The plan itself outlines five goals: developing a data for equity strategy, improving access & advancing outcomes, increasing the amount of contracts awarded to women-owned and small disadvantaged businesses, addressing health equity for underserved Veterans, and building & maintaining trust with underserved Veterans. Each section encompasses an understanding of the VA’s lack of substantial demographic data, delineating the solution to restructuring data collection processes at onset with every presented goal. Additionally, a heavy focus is placed on furthering education, awareness, and community engagement with existing services and benefits. The only tangible Department action across all stated goals is a commitment to establishing a DEI-driven holistic Review Board for grant applications. Overall, the Equity Action Plan submitted by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs evidences avoidance and framing tactics associated with the poststructural approach to problem representation, limiting the potential impact of equity advancement initiatives to resolve the Department’s disparities.

Department of Defense

The Department of Defense (DOD) outlines their goals into five categories: procurement and contracting, military installations, military families, equitable artificial intelligence (AI) research and development, and underserved communities. In comparison to the DOE, many of their stated equity initiatives lack substantial recognition and historical contextualization. However, the proposals are more substantive than those offered by the VA.

The DOD fails to define “equity” explicitly. However, in reading and analyzing their plan we can discern what they mean by “equity”: recognizing past harms caused by the department, improving existing programs, and implementing new programs and practices to ameliorate the harms caused by the Department. However, the framing of equity conveyed fails to fully consider the fundamental attributes and actions necessary for successful policy outcomes. Though the DOD includes procedural and accountability measures for all proposed projects, to achieve truly equitable policy, the inclusion of affected populations is necessary at every stage of policy planning. Policy makers should be informed and have strong historical contextualization to create a foundation for strong policy. Policy ought to be made in the spirit of co-creation, well-articulated, based on quantitative and qualitative data, have a plan for implementation, and for evaluation.

For each of the five goals established by the DOD, different parts of achieving equitable outcomes are drawn upon. To improve equity across procurement and contracting the DOD aims to increase small business participation, participation of underserved communities, and improve workforce equity by analyzing data on their practices and ensure permanent funding through the Offices of Small Business Programs.

Next, the DOD considers military installations as relics of World War II and the Cold War. These relics have caused adverse environmental, health, and economic impacts on Native American communities, Guam, and others. To ameliorate the harms caused, the DOD has committed to investing at least \$12 million per year, runs an environmental cleanup and restoration program, and is restoring and preserving natural resources and habitats in Guam. To improve equity the DOD seeks to engage with stakeholders and their communities to give a voice to the impacted communities and provides an annual report to Congress to ensure accountability.

Military families are often adversely affected by parent and/or spousal employment in the armed forces. The DOD highlighted a need to improve education access, improving employment opportunities for military spouses, and improving health care, food security, and housing security for military families. While there is little action plan for the latter four needs, the DOD does aim to specifically increase equity for students of color and those with disabilities in educational settings by investing in the construction, renovation, and repair of elementary and secondary public schools. Further, they plan to implement a DEI division in DODEA to examine, identify, and eliminate inequities, and implement culturally responsive teaching strategies.

The DOD established a commitment to the safe, ethical, and equitable use of AI by eliminating biases in algorithms and advancing diversity and representation of BIPOC individuals in STEM fields by investing in HBCUs and MSIs. This investment in HBCUs and MSIs is an actionable step to increasing equity in the military and related fields, and involves stakeholders by soliciting feedback to ensure accountability in implementing their equity plan. Finally, the DOD aims to advance equity in education at all levels by investing and creating partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) and MSIs through programmatic investments which focus on STEM. While these investments are valuable, no mention of the historical context or the participation of the stakeholders is made, and assessment is largely quantitative.

Conclusion

Executive Order 13895 initiated the push in creating equitable policy at the federal level. Requiring every federal Department to formulate equity action plans not only encourages them to introspect on their priorities, but also gives insight to readers on how equity is understood by each agency. Among the three Departments considered, the Department of Education had the strongest action plan. The DOE gave power to historically underrepresented groups and offered historical contextualization not seen in the DOD and VA action plans. Ultimately, each plan failed to meet the criteria necessary to create and successfully implement equitable policy. Equitable policy making must include all stakeholders at each stage of the policy process, be historically contextualized and recognize harms caused, be based on quantitative and qualitative data, and have a plan for implementation and evaluation.

References

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United States Department of Education, 2022 Agency Equity Plan related to Executive Order 13985.

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