



Role(s) of Higher Education in Helping Diverse and Excellent Public Schools Gain Recognition

**Edmund Hamann
Mark Larson**

Equity by Design

Role(s) of Higher Education in Helping Diverse and Excellent Public Schools Gain Recognition

Often education researchers enter schools only to depict inequity and weak practice, but the same empirical skills that illuminate challenges can, under a different premise, illuminate excellence.

This brief, laid out as a dialogue between university-based researcher, Dr. Edmund Hamann, and urban high school principal, Mark Larson, describes how graduate students helped a diverse public high school document its excellence and win National Education Policy Center (NEPC) recognition as a 'School of Opportunity'.

Although this case is unique in specific detail, other school/higher education partnerships could clearly function like this one did. Good schools may not have staff to document their multifaceted responsiveness, but, with university assistance, they can.

Dr. Hamann: Mark, first let me offer my congratulations to you, your staff, and your students for together helping Lincoln High (in Lincoln, Nebraska) be recognized as a gold-level School of Opportunity by the University of Colorado's National Education Policy Center (NEPC). The description of Lincoln High by Valerie Strauss and Kevin Welner in the Washington Post (Strauss, 2018), which was written because of your recognition, describes Lincoln High as "a haven of support" that "builds a web of support for its diverse student population." Before we go any further, do you think these are apt characterizations of your school? And do you think other high schools could do what Lincoln High does?

Mr. Larson: I do think those descriptions fit what we have tried to build at Lincoln High. I think one of the things that maybe I've tried to clarify as I've talked to people about this recognition, however, is that while we were recognized with this award this year, I think it's important to understand that a school doesn't become of a "haven of support" overnight or even in one year. I think when you try to recognize some of the things that this award does it's not always as simple as a new program or intervention. Culture is something that is shaped over time and by decisions by people who share the same values. We have implemented programs, interventions, and initiatives that have helped us build our "web of support" for our students, but ultimately those things that have been implemented and for the most part engaged by staff because of the people in our community

and our shared values. So to answer your question, I do absolutely think that other schools can do what LHS does, but I think it's less about programs than it is about people and culture.

Dr. Hamann: So the organizers of the Schools of Opportunity recognition point out that, "The Schools of Opportunity project arises out of the reality that existing recognitions strongly favor schools that enroll students who, outside of school, have the richest opportunities. Accordingly, this project recognizes high schools that have demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to equity and excellence by giving all students the opportunity to succeed" (Schools of Opportunity, 2018). What are some of the ways Lincoln High shows its commitment to equity and excellence? How do you assure that a commitment to either of these virtues is not pursued at the expense of the other?

Mr. Larson: I think the biggest thing that represents Lincoln High's commitment to equity and excellence is that we have a culture that is student-centered to the point that we have resources and support, clubs and activities that arise not necessarily out of tradition or because it's what we've always done but because they arise out of needs that we see that students have.

Lincoln High is a place that is genuine in our efforts to help our students achieve their potential. So in that way, no need or "program" is pursued at the expense of another. For some reason, I'm thinking about our students who are interested in dance. At Lincoln High, we have the traditional dance team that usually performs at halftimes of basketball games and such. But a couple of years ago, a group of students and staff realized that there were many students who were talented in this area who were not able to participate in the traditional dance team. So, over the last few years we have started Ground Zero, which is a Break Dancing Group, we have started Baile Folklórico which is a Latino Dance Group. These two groups both get to showcase their abilities and talents at school events and I think that is a small example of how opportunities at Lincoln High grow organically out of genuine need and care for our students.



Dr. Hamann: I suppose one working assumption of this interview is that being recognized as 'School of Opportunity' is a good thing. Is it? How has the recognition been consequential for Lincoln High? What has been the reaction of your faculty? Your students? School district administration? Does the school board know about it? What about other constituencies?

Mr. Larson: This recognition has been a very positive thing for our school. Being an educator is not an easy gig and sometimes, especially in today's political climate, it is a thankless one. And working in a building like ours, in a district like ours, sometimes we don't get recognized for our hard work. This award has provided affirmation to our staff, students, and community about the great place that Lincoln High is and has provided us encouragement to build on what we have. We have been recognized by our School Board and Administration, by the Local Newspaper, and our State Legislature.

Dr. Hamann: Building on this more abstractly, is it good that the ‘School of Opportunity’ recognition program exists? Does it or could it link you to other schools? Should it do so more?

Mr. Larson: I think the work that NEPC does to recognize schools for this kind of work is necessary and very important. Education is about product, but it's also a process and this recognition is about the process and not just the product.

Dr. Hamann: The Schools of Opportunity recognition organizers go on to say, “[W]e recognized schools for engaging in proven practices that close opportunity gaps for student learning. In doing so, we encourage such practices by bringing attention to what good schooling looks like, by showing policymakers alternative ways to ascertain school performance, and by inspiring schools to build capacity and thus improve learning outcomes for all students” (Schools of Opportunity, 2018). To apply for the recognition, Lincoln High needed to explain how it pursued at least six of ten selection criteria (Schools of Opportunity, 2018), including criteria 1 and 2, plus four of the remaining eight. Lincoln High wrote to criteria 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, and 10. Why did you decide that Criterion 5 (Support Teachers as Professionals), Criterion 7 (Provide Students with Additional Needed Services and Supports), Criterion 9 (Build on the Strengths of Language Minority Students), and Criterion 10 (Sustain Equitable and Meaningful Parent and Community Engagement) were the criteria that you should write to?

Mr. Larson: We felt like the criteria that we selected were our strongest areas and places where we have invested the most time and energy. For Criterion 5, I am proud of the culture that we have cultivated where our most important resource we have is our people. We use our own teachers as the leaders and drivers of school improvement and professional development. As I stated in an earlier answer, I believe that we have provided students with unique supports and services that genuinely meets the needs of our students. This includes academic, social/emotional, and practical needs. At LHS, in line with Criterion 9, we also view our students who are learning English as a vital part of our building culture and we have tried to be intentional about that. In terms of Criterion 10, we hesitated because we believe that we still have areas here where we can grow, but we also know that engaging our families and community is an area that we have intentionally invested in. These strengths and some areas of growth became clear to us in our partnership with your graduate class, which helped us with this process.

Dr. Hamann: Because your answer brings up my role and the role of my graduate students in relation to the crafting of the first draft of your ultimately successful application, perhaps we should backtrack a little bit and discuss the origin of this specific proposal as well as the more general theme of how institutions of higher education might help K-12 schools gain recognition for what they do well, in this case achieving both excellence and equity. As you know, I’m a professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (less than a mile from Lincoln High) and in that capacity sometimes teach a graduate class called “Effecting High School Improvement.” As part of that class I like to have students visit high schools as part of an effort to help them conceptualize high schools as sites for research. In this case, we visited Lincoln High and used the criteria of the ‘Schools of Opportunity’ program as our template regarding the questions to ask your teachers, staff, and students as we visited with them. So thank you for ‘letting us in’ and allowing us to learn so much.

Mr. Larson: As I said, it was a great opportunity for us to learn and reflect as well, so believe me when I say, "Thank you".

Dr. Hamann: As you likely know, when researchers visit schools or study schools, they often generate studies that are critical of schools. Years ago, Bradley Levinson and Dorothy Holland (1996) wrote about the paradox that researchers were dependent on 'gatekeepers' (typically school leaders) to gain access to schools, but then often left those gatekeepers vulnerable when their subsequent studies were critical. What do you think of the twin ideas that research matters, but that concurrently it can make schools vulnerable instead of automatically being helpful?



Mr. Larson: I'd be lying if I didn't hesitate some when the opportunity for this collaboration came up originally. As a school leader, I knew that we were going to be vulnerable. We talk to our teachers all of the time about how the most important thing you can do to improve is to watch someone else teach or to have someone else watch you teach and give you feedback. I felt like this was a great opportunity for us to get feedback on what we are doing well and on areas where we needed to improve.

Dr. Hamann: Our challenge with this course exercise was to 'get into a high school', in this case Lincoln High School and to have that entry authentically position graduate students to think about schools as research sites, but to sidestep or avoid the challenge of writing negatively/critically in a way that would hurt rather than help your school. That was part of why the 'School of Opportunity' application worked so well. We could look closely at what you were doing, document it accurately, and provide a frame regarding Lincoln High's range of efforts to be more inclusive, supportive, helpful, etc. Was it useful for you to get 20-pages of text back from us that described (from our synthesis of conversations with you, your teachers, administrators, and students) Lincoln High's operation in various favorable but accurate ways? Have you ever used that text (or pieces of it) for anything else?

Mr. Larson: Having another set of eyes to look at what we do was very helpful. We have used that document in our School Improvement Process as we continue to evaluate what we do.

Dr. Hamann: One of the things I was insistent upon was turning the text we generated over to you rather than submitting it directly to the National Education Policy Center. I wanted the decision to submit or not submit to be yours not mine. I think that's one dimension of the ethics for showing how higher education can work with schools on initiatives like this. Would you agree? Are there other ethical claims or 'ways of doing business' that you think are important for higher education collaborations with high schools?

Mr. Larson: I really appreciated this agreement in the partnership, because it made this process less "risky" for us because we were able to reflect on it before it was sent off.

Dr. Hamann: Finally, what's next for Lincoln High because of the School of Opportunity recognition and next for prospective future collaboration with UNL? Does being a "Gold-level" honoree position Lincoln High to do more things? Seek more resources? Do you think you're positioned to mentor other schools that want to engage in the equity and excellence work that Lincoln High was recognized for? How, if at all, should the University of Nebraska-Lincoln be part of any of that?

Mr. Larson: This recognition has put Lincoln High in a great position. We are currently in year 3 of 5 of a School Improvement Grant. This means that we are already in the process of making decisions about how we will maintain some of the amazing things that we have going on. We have data that supports the improvements we've seen, but this recognition gives us a grant chance to show others the benefit of some the things we've received funding for. This potentially will give us opportunities to find additional funding sources to continue this great work. I'm also excited about the possibility of partnering and learning from other schools with similar strengths and challenges. We have already collaborated with Hinkley High School in Aurora Colorado to strengthen our Restorative Practices efforts. This experience has also made me realize that we have a great resource in our collaboration with UNL. The fact that we have the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in our front yard is a great way for us to learn from each other and bring together the practice and the theory of education. I'm excited about this continued collaboration.

The fact that we have the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in our front yard is a great way for us to learn from each other and bring together the practice and the theory of education.

Meet the Authors

Edmund T. Hamann is a Professor in the Dept. of Teaching, Learning, & Teacher Education at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and an Equity Fellow for the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center. Interested in ways school reform/improvement efforts do or do not include all types of students, among the courses he teaches are "Effecting High School Improvement" and "Teaching ELLs in the Content Areas."

Mark Larson is the Principal of Lincoln High School in Lincoln Nebraska, a Title I school that serves students who speak 30 different languages and that was recognized by the National Education Policy Center as a 2017 "Gold" School of Opportunity.



About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

Copyright © 2018 by Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center

Recommended Citation: Hamann, E., & Larson, M. (2018). Role(s) of higher education in helping diverse and excellent public schools gain recognition. *Equity by Design*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).

Disclaimer

Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this practitioner brief were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Grant S004D110021). However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

References

Levinson, B. A., Foley, D. E., & Holland, D. C. (1996). *The cultural production of the educated person: critical ethnographies of schooling and local practice*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Schools of Opportunity. (2018). Selection criteria. Retrieved from <http://schoolsofopportunity.org/selection-criteria>

Strauss, V. (2018). A haven for refugees, this Nebraska high school builds a web of support for its diverse student population. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/answer-sheet/wp/2018/05/16/a-haven-for-refugees-this-nebraska-high-school-builds-a-web-of-support-for-its-diverse-student-population/?utm_term=.a2d7c1c3aef2

**MIDWEST & PLAINS
EQUITY
ASSISTANCE CENTER**

A PROJECT OF  **GREAT LAKES
EQUITY
CENTER**

ED.gov



INDIANA UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
IUPUI