We decided to focus on equity, which has become an issue of profound importance in our society, because there are large differences between the education available to high and low income, to suburban youngsters and inner-city children and to people of different races.

Arthur Levine
President, Teachers College

An Inclusive Focus

INSIDE: And what about faculty who do not engage in work that bears a link or practical import—or who don't see themselves as working directly on equity-related issues?

LEVINE: The notion of focus is meant to say, that if the goal of the institute wasn't to get everybody involved in practice, or everybody involved in policy. The goal is to conduct important research on equity, and we would hope that people in other disciplines would have different roles. Some might look at child development in the context of a laboratory in which they study the issue. Others might do it in schools. Some might do research for scholars. Others might take that research and choose to apply and expand its implications for policy or its implications for practice. We would want all the people at Teachers College to be engaged in precisely the same forms of research.

INSIDE: Would we, over time, see a change in the mix of discipline-area emphases here?

LEVINE: Yes, I suspect that over time there would be faculty who are more and more involved in the equity agenda. When we recruit new faculty in any area, we might ask, would this person be more likely to contribute to our focus on equity? So we'd look for people with two traits instead of one.

INSIDE: Is this a mission that seems ineradicable? Is it one too large to imagine, if the funding runs out?

LEVINE: I think it's one that is too large to imagine, if the funding runs out. I think it's one that is too large to imagine if it was to be funded by a variety of philanthropic organizations.

INSIDE: Are we picking on too narrow a focus?

LEVINE: We are seeking a broad mandate to do research in the areas of equity and racial justice, in terms of its effect on policy and practice. We have a faculty of 110, and each [faculty] member, for the most part, has been defined by their own research. This will permit us to bundle people's research together, so that people together who work in common areas [to] produce research together [and] publish together, so that one loud voice is possible in a way that it wasn't before.

LEVINE: The new mission will make our research a louder voice in terms of its effect on practice and policy. It will be something much larger than any institute or even evaluation. So what we're imagining is a resource for the College—that it will work with families—in which ideas would be developed with families, bringing it to social institutions. It might be a resource for the College to be engaged in precisely the same forms of research.

INSIDE: Is the new mission also intended to change the world?

LEVINE: Yes, that's a mission that is too large to imagine, if it was to be funded by a variety of philanthropic organizations. This is a mission that seems ineradicable. It is one that is too large to imagine if the funding runs out. It is one that is too large to imagine if it was to be funded by a variety of philanthropic organizations.

INSIDE: If there's anything to change, who are the actors that have the capacity to change it? It is funded by a government? Is it practitioners? Is it school boards? Is it teachers? And once those audiences are identified, the need is to get the research into the most usable forms for that audience. For instance, if we identified legislators as a key audience for a project, we might testify before the legislature. We might do briefings for their staffs. We might create short, readable pieces describing the research—knowledge people can use. We might prepare model legislation. We might try to make sure the media covers this in the capital city. All of this is addressed specificall y at affecting legislation in the areas we think necessary.

The institute would also be a laboratory. Most graduate grants are for five years. We would finance our research, bringing it to schools, bringing it to families, bringing it to social institutions. It's a laboratory in which we can bundle people's research, working with school districts, working with families—on which issues would be tried and made available to the general public to see the successes, assuming we have them.

Finally, we hope the institute will serve as a resource for the College—that it will work with faculty members on syllabi, curriculum and instruction as the faculty members move toward the equity mission of the school. We'd hope departments might use it. We'd hope they might turn to the institute for direction. Even so. What we're imagining is something much larger than any institute or center we have at the College.

A Convening Authority

INSIDE: Talk for a minute about the think tank—about the convening authority.

LEVINE: We would bring together a diverse group of faculty who have a broad range of interests. Data is drawn neither from the right nor from the left. Data is drawn from research and should be evaluated by the quality of that research. We want this institute to engage in the most excellent research that's available in the country on issues of equity. If people want to value what comes out of the institute—not because it represents their political persuasion, but because it's so good that its quality can't be denied. And we should follow that data to the logical conclusions and conclusions lead to

INSIDE: But are there the projects the institute would exclude because of some sense that it falls within a certain spectrum of opinion?

LEVINE: I can't imagine any project we would avoid because of the political consequences. There's a very healthy potential funder is, we promise to disappoint people. We're willing to take a position that represents liberal causes, our conclusions could be conservative in their implications. We're willing to take a position that represents conservative causes, our research could lead to liberal conclusions. We will follow the data where it leads.

To read the rest of the interview, conducted by Joe Levine, executive director of external affairs at Teachers College, visit the Teachers College Web site at www.tc.columbia.edu/news/article.htm?id=4789.

Still another reason is that Teachers College is uniquely constructed as an education school. We're divided into three areas: education, psychology and health. And the fact is, the equity issue isn't simply something that occurs in schools. It involves schools, but also families and communities. The emphases that occurs in schools. It involves schools, but also families and communities. The emphasis school. We're divided into three areas: education, psychology and health. And the emphasis school. We're divided into three areas: education, psychology and health. And the emphasis school. We're divided into three areas: education, psychology and health. And the emphasis school. We're divided into three areas: education, psychology and health.