

TRANSFORMATIONAL
COLLEGE REDESIGN:

**BUILDING BLOCKS
FOR
INSTITUTIONALIZING
RACIAL EQUITY**

with
discussion questions

BY
MINA DADGAR, PHD
EDUCATION EQUITY SOLUTIONS



About this Resource

Evidence abounds about why it is important to pursue racial equity. Yet, how to practically remove long-standing oppressive structures, processes, habits, and mindsets in the community college setting is less clear. This guide synthesizes learnings of California Community College "equity champions" in their efforts to dismantle structural racism and create lasting transformation.

The learnings are offered here as building blocks for equity-focused transformational change. The embedded discussion questions, and the facilitation guide, offer reflection prompts for college teams to help strengthen existing efforts focused on more equitable student experiences and outcomes.

Building Blocks for Institutionalizing Racial Equity on Campus

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Background

In 2017, the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) made an explicit commitment to eliminating differences in credential attainment and transfer rates by race and income by 2022ⁱ—awarding \$150M to support guided pathways adoption over a five-year period in service of these goals. Amid greater awareness of racially motivated discrimination and violence, the CCCCCO doubled down on this call to action to dismantle institutional racism across students’ experience inside and outside the classroom in spring 2020.

To learn from emerging efforts to meaningfully address inequities for students of color, Education Equity Solutions interviewed 28 transformational leaders in colleges across the state between April and July 2020.ⁱⁱ This resource synthesizes their insights and inspirations, which faculty, staff, and administrators committed to equity through action can use as they work to advance racial justice goals.



Building Block 1: Lay a Strong Foundation for Reform

Transformational leaders share that creating lasting change begins with ongoing attention to movement building, right from the start. Equipping equity champions with the support and skills required for successful leadership is essential to generating and sustaining momentum.

Build a Movement Focused on Racial Equity

Movement-building means changing hearts and minds at scale. It involves engaging large groups of campus constituents in ongoing inquiry and dialogue about institutional structures, processes, and mindsets that either dismantle or maintain institutional racism. Without this shared commitment in place, colleges find it difficult to authentically and meaningfully grapple with the culture and practice issues contributing to inequitable outcomes. One faculty shares:

If you have not mobilized the campus for change, then you cannot have difficult conversations about changes in roles that are needed to support real reform. So, you engage in surface-level work . . . like a few people creat[ing] metamajors without anything really changing.

Generating this collegewide investment requires both dialogue and action that creates awareness and ownership of the sources of racial inequities in student success and completion. These activities include anti-racism and implicit bias trainings that amplify student voices, leverage data, and include experiences that help employees get a glimpse into how students navigate college processes, engage with classrooms and programs, and perceive the overall climate. Importantly, contextualizing dialogue and training for specific roles and infusing these activities across core functions (e.g., professional development, new employee orientation, hiring committee preparation, department and division meetings) can help campus constituents pragmatically understand how their decisions and actions promote or hinder equity. One vice president of instruction shares:

We have had so much dialogue around equity in different spaces over the years. We have intentionally identified individuals within and outside our college that can lead those conversations for different groups on campus. Because we have had such a strong foundation, when COVID-19 happened, we could talk frankly about how faculty course assignments and scheduling would affect equity.

Uplift Equity Champions

Such reckoning requires courageous leadership to counter influential voices that might be inclined to maintain the status quo, deflect accountability, and stall progress. Transformational college executives take professional risks and support equity champions—faculty leaders, deans

and other “middle leaders” in formal and informal roles—when they make unpopular decisions to change inequitable policies, processes, and practices. They ensure that advancing equity is the departure point for all major campus initiatives and view these efforts as an opportunity for equity champions to lead, rather than treating college redesign as parallel work. One college dean explains:

There are meetings where people want to talk about equity, and the facilitators keep saying, “Let’s put that in the parking lot, because right now we need to complete program maps” . . . So, then people feel that guided pathways is another task that takes attention away from equity.

To effectively shepherd redesign, equity champions need a range of skills. These capabilities include (1) facilitating dialogue with a broad range of campus constituents in the presence of power dynamics; (2) motivating others, building coalitions, and engaging resistance; (3) telling stories with data to communicate existing racial inequities and raise up student voices; and (4) creating effective teams that can balance inquiry with action. Interviewees said there were limited opportunities for developing through mentorship or training opportunities. Executive leaders can help equity champions deepen this capacity by investing in their professional learning and mentoring them along the way.

SUMMARY

LAY A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR REFORM: College Redesign Approaches	
<i>Transformational Approach</i>	<i>Traditional Approach</i>
College engages in ongoing inquiry and leverages data—including student voices—to change hearts and minds at scale. Ongoing inquiry is balanced with quick wins that create momentum for change. Resistors are embraced and engaged in change work.	Most campus constituents are unaware of key metrics such as completion rates for different racial groups. Because the equity imperative for change is unclear, the opposition of a few loud voices can stall progress or creates surface-level change.
College leaders challenge historical structures, policies, and practices to advance student-centered, equity-minded reform. Middle leaders are mentored and supported to carry out a racial equity agenda.	College leaders avoid “sacred cows” (e.g., hiring practices, student-centered course scheduling, anti-racist classroom practices, etc.). Middle leaders cannot trust that college leaders will “have their back” if they take professional risks.
Initiatives such as developmental education reform or guided pathways are used to refine, uplift, and scale the existing work and voices of equity champions.	Efforts to improve racial equity and guided pathways, developmental education, and other reforms are treated as separate initiatives with no clear or connected “why.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways do our college personnel receive data on credential attainment and transfer rates for different racial/ethnic groups? How are our faculty specifically engaged in conversations about course success data, disaggregated by race/ethnicity (if at all)?
2. How does our college infuse equity training in core functions (e.g., hiring committee trainings, new employee orientations, professional development, and discipline-specific meetings)? What areas need more attention to promote racial equity?
3. Who are the faculty and staff serving as equity champions on our campus? How supported do they feel and how do we know? What more can we do to support their work and build their leadership capacity?



Building Block 2: Gather the Right Crew

Replacing historically oppressive structures, processes, and practices requires the involvement of individuals engaged in different aspects of the student experience—including students themselves. Teams that are cross-functional and cross-hierarchical and meaningfully include students can identify specific challenges in the student experience and design related solutions informed by their multiple perspectives and roles in the work.

Create Inclusive Design Teams

A design team is a team that is created to better understand specific aspects of students' experience and improve them. For example, design teams can focus on improving students' experience in enrolling in college, deciding on a major, receiving holistic supports, or taking the right courses and succeeding in them. To be effective, design teams should include diverse perspectives including that of front-line staff that work closely with students and students themselves. Often, the perspectives of staff who work directly with students and adjunct faculty (who tend to teach the most marginalized student groups) are missing from inquiry and design activities. One challenge in creating effective inquiry and design teams is conflating their function with that of a representative committee, which may be effective at oversight but is ill-equipped to identify a problem from the different perspectives, especially students most negatively impacted by institutional racism.

When exploring data and examining the factors impacting outcomes or developing new approaches to ensure more equitable experiences and completion, colleges demonstrating transformational change create teams that include those who have front-line interaction with students. They involve individuals from across functions and different levels of the organization's hierarchy. They also engage racially marginalized students themselves in examining the sources of inequities and designing solutions.

Meaningfully Involve Students in the Reform Process

Authentic collaboration with students is an essential aspect of inclusive design. Most colleges limit student involvement in institutional change work to occasional surveys, focus groups, or student panels. Token student representatives are included in meetings that are mostly about college operations rather than transformation of students' experience. As a result, colleges can avoid difficult conversations about student realities and the disproportionate impact of specific college policies, processes, and practices on their journey. One faculty member asserts:

Frankly, I have never seen any college getting to a place of shared ownership [of inequities] without dialogue with students about their experience at the college . . . the kind of dialogue that turns power dynamics upside down, where faculty and student service professionals sit in a room with students and investigate their roles in creating inequities.

Intentional and supported student engagement is an effective strategy to ensure student success and racial equity remain the focus of reform efforts. At colleges fostering transformational change, these efforts are ongoing and multi-faceted. Rather than only including students who are already highly involved on campus, students from racial groups most negatively affected by institutional barriers are recruited to examine data, encouraged to speak their truth, and invited to co-create solutions. These colleges work to ensure students are as prepared as college personnel for design team participation, are supported in addressing issues that might arise, and are able to exercise their influence throughout their involvement.

This kind of student engagement can have important implications not only for dismantling institutional racism for students but also for college personnel. One faculty explains:

The structures of academic meetings are status driven, and when you don't have students at the table, it is easier to silence the voices of faculty of color—staff of any color—or part-time professionals and privilege the voices of White tenured faculty or administrators.

SUMMARY

GATHER THE RIGHT CREW: College Redesign Approaches	
<i>Transformational Approach</i>	<i>Traditional Approach</i>
Design teams are formed to tackle specific issues in the student experience and generate new approaches. Individuals from various functions and different levels of the organization make up the team depending on the “problem,” including frontline staff and adjunct faculty. Meetings are facilitated to allow all constituents to voice their perspectives and meaningfully contribute to the development of solutions.	Design teams primarily consist of tenured faculty and administrators. Historically privileged voices dominate dialogue and decision-making.
Students most negatively affected by institutional barriers and societal racism are active and equal partners in understanding equity gaps and co-creating solutions.	Student engagement is periodic and limited to surveys, focus groups, student panels, or token student leader representation in meetings about campus operations rather than student experience.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How can we establish more inclusive design and decision-making structures to involve individuals who work directly with students in different capacities (e.g., peer mentors, frontline staff in different functions, counseling, adjunct faculty)?
2. What are some opportunities for “early wins” in engaging students where we can quickly act on their input? What structures, resources, and staffing do we need for an ongoing student engagement strategy?
3. How might we recruit students who are most negatively affected by institutional barriers in co-creating solutions? How can we ensure power dynamics are minimized and students can safely speak their truth?



Building Block 3: Scaffold Services Based on Need

Universal removal of structural barriers does not equate to “everyone should get the same thing.” While oppressive institutional structures must be reworked to impact as many students as possible, colleges simply do not have enough resources to give every student access to high-touch supports. In fact, without establishing priorities for service delivery, colleges can perpetuate long-standing inequities, as one vice president of student services emphasizes:

Given our limited resources, if we do not prioritize who gets help, we continue to go by the first-come-first-served-model, which serves the students who can afford to be first in line.

Universally Redesign Oppressive Structures while Prioritizing Resources by Need

Colleges pursuing transformational change do not treat support in an “either/or” way. They examine and learn from what works in special populations and categorial programs and scale elements where resources permit (rather than dismissing them as “boutique”). They both work to excavate barriers that harm all students *and* select the right “tools” to bolster support for focal student groups—prioritizing exclusive access to programs and services based on racial equity goals, evidence, and intentional monitoring of student progress and need. One vice president of instruction illustrates:

Originally, we were all about universal design, and soon we learned we simply do not have the resources to give everyone the same thing. . . So, we now have designed specific supports for African-American men because that is who the data is telling us we should prioritize, and we are in fact narrowing the gaps.

Redesigning key historical structures and practices for equity demand this “both/and” approach—coined “targeted universalism”ⁱⁱⁱ by John Powell. For example, when it comes to reworking developmental education, removing barriers for all students means replacing prerequisite remedial courses with proven corequisite and other imbedded support models. Notably, when prerequisite remediation is offered even optionally, Black and Latinx students disproportionately enroll in these courses.^{iv} At the same time, colleges can simultaneously utilize affinity groups and learning communities for Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and other racially marginalized students to ensure they receive the academic and nonacademic support needed to succeed in college-level work. Another example is working to reverse the tracking of students with low incomes and Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) backgrounds into majors with limited labor market value. Actively recruiting students of color into majors with higher economic returns—especially programs of study where these groups are underrepresented—and providing high-touch and proactive supports can facilitate their completion and ultimately their mobility.

SUMMARY

SCAFFOLD SERVICES BASED ON NEED: College Redesign Approaches	
<i>Transformational Approach</i>	<i>Traditional Approach</i>
Institutional barriers are removed universally, while high-touch and resource-intensive supports are tailored and prioritized for students who most affected by societal and institutional racism and oppression.	The false dichotomy between “universal design” and targeted programs creates competition between guided pathways and equity. Because access to high-touch supports occurs on a first-come-first-served basis, students with greatest need rarely receive resource intensive resources.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the structures and processes that track students or otherwise hinder their progress? How can we re-work them to benefit students?
2. Examining outcomes across student groups, which groups of students should receive prioritized supports?
3. What do we know about the effectiveness of our existing programs that aim to close equity gaps? How can we act on the information we already have?



ⁱ Between April and July of 2020, interviews were conducted with 28 community college leaders and those working as technical assistance providers to support them. Guided Pathways Regional Coordinators and a group of college practitioners were recruited to help identify leaders whose work on equity and transformational change had either substantially reduced equity gaps or was recognized by others as having the potential to do so. A sample of “transformational leaders” was then selected for interviews to represent the variety of roles, as well as geographic regions and institutional size. The interviewees included six faculty, seven deans, six vice presidents, five Guided Pathways Regional Coordinators, and four technical assistance providers who worked with colleges on the ground on guided pathways and developmental education reform efforts. The technical assistance providers included five or six Guided Pathways Regional Coordinators hired by the Systems Office to assist colleges individually and coordinate across colleges in a region, to implement guided pathway and developmental education reform with equity focus.

ⁱⁱ In addition to a systemwide commitment to guided pathways, the CCCCO has created a new funding formula that incentivizes equity goals and has implementing legislative guidelines to bar colleges from requiring students to enroll in pre-requisite remediation without evidence that they improve students’ likelihood of success in transfer-level math and English. In 2017, the California Community College Chancellors’ Office created six system-wide goals for increasing student success and equity. Find detailed information on the goals at <https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/Files/Communications/101920-ccc-vision-onepager-accessible-final.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information on targeted universalism, please see: <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/targeteduniversalism>.

^{iv} For more information see: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.3102/0002831219872500?journalCode=aera&>.



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**EDITING BY
KELLEY KARANDJEFF**

**DESIGN BY
LAURA BURR**

**SUPPORTED BY
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