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The Promise of Our Practices: Leveraging Equity-Minded Learning and Learner- Centered Approaches

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Anti-racism is not an identity or a checklist; it's a practice

Andrea Ranae

When we create beloved community, environments that are anti-racist and inclusive, it need not matter whether those spaces are diverse. What matters is that should difference enter the world of beloved community it can find a place of welcome, a place to belong.

bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*

If postsecondary spaces, campuses, curricula, and classrooms (hybrid, virtual, or traditional) are deeply held as bastions of opportunity, growth, and pipelines to economic growth in and for our communities then we must examine the message of the late Dr. bell hooks. How do we facilitate welcome? How have we established ourselves as a place to belong? What are our macro and micro-practices that intercept and dismantle systemic, historic systems of racist, oppressive, structurally assaultive protocols and practices? How do we actively work to facilitate affirming, invitational, community for all populations who enter our hallowed halls?

From offices of student services, business and finance, campus safety, financial aid, and beyond on our campuses there are multiple layers of practice and ownership a campus carries to leave no one

behind. However, the most granular space all adult learners enter on our campuses, bringing their attention, focus, lived histories, and hopes is the classroom. How are campuses leveraging the robust opportunity we hold to engage adult learners? More importantly, how are we rearranging or intentionally designing that space to facilitate belonging? How are we implementing and sustaining intentional, consistent, focused energy on the quality of the experience they have in each course with each faculty member they encounter? How are we maximizing and honoring the sacrifice each of those individuals made to commit to earning a credential and/or degree with us? One way to ensure that we do not lose sight of the power and promise of the post-secondary classroom is to expect ALL faculty, staff, and support members in the teaching and learning spaces we hold to show

up with a commitment toward adopting an equity-minded mindset. The Center for Urban Education or CUE (2020) has established context for the practicing of equity-mindedness and in part cites it as, “an awareness of the socio-historical context of exclusionary practices and racism in higher education, and the effect of power asymmetries on opportunities and outcomes for racially minoritized students” p. 26.

The quality of the teaching-learning process in a course, credential, or program of study rests on the strength of the curriculum (c), instruction (i), and the assessment (a) or CIA. The CIA is akin to a three-legged stool where each is required or carries responsibility for stabilizing the teaching-learning process adult learners expect to reach objectives or learning outcomes intended for the pathway. Each of those legs however carries a power beyond belief when delivered in ways that reinforce structural inequalities, deficit thinking, and/or reductionist approaches to student voice, lived histories, and sociopolitical realities. In short, if the CIA on our campuses is not learner-centered, anchored to the realities of the communities served, inclusive, and invitational, we will not make the progress talked about with retention and completion rates of racialized, minoritized populations.

A professional development plan on our campuses that takes the temperature of our CIA, readies the faculty and sustains their growth in examining (and where needed) retooling their curricula, instruction, and assessment practices to truly reflect whom they serve is a long-term, systemically adopted and monitored plan. It's not a preparatory exercise for an upcoming accreditation visit or a one-off effort that ends when an externally secured granting cycle sunsets or a one-and-done workshop in the Fall semester of the new academic year. It is however a process codified in the strategic plan for the entire campus, with responsibility across divisions, lives beyond the equity officer or unit, and breathes in each orifice of the campus' ethos.

How do our campuses codify equity-minded and inclusive practices in each instructional contact an adult learner has on their campus? How does each faculty member's role begin with critical self-

examination in facilitating a sense of belonging? One initial way to begin while examining more systemic, long-range plans is quite simply, the syllabus. Departments, units, and faculty shifting toward equity-minded practices may consider the significance of beginning with the first communication or contract that a learner and their instructor share and mutually own—the course syllabus.

The unit, department, or course instructor adopting a move toward equity-minded approaches is acknowledging the inherent social positioning of faculty in that setting historically and currently. This move requires the reframing of the primary initial course agreements or norms and shifts this document towards a tool for bridging the students' frames or ways of knowing with the instructor's frames and/or bodies of knowledge through the setting of class customs or expectations. From a Freire (2017) lens it aims to shift the power, privilege, or oppression racialized students may typically experience in unexamined higher education settings.

Many scholars have addressed the role of the syllabus in establishing classroom and cultural rules for engagement in the post-secondary classroom across the decades (Harnish et al. 2011, Parson, L. 2016, Taylor et al., 2019). The reminders of Taylor et al. (2019), ring particularly promising if we seek to improve the environments our racially minoritized populations inherit on our campuses. Among the many variables of the role of the syllabus is the 'tone' it emits as a framing document for the course's pathway.

	COLD	WARM
ATTENDANCE	I expect you to attend every class. Please let me know if circumstances make you miss more than 3 classes during the semester. I will drop you from the class roster in accordance with the University attendance policy.	You should attend every class but extenuating circumstances arise that can make this difficult. If you cannot attend a class, please let me know. If circumstances make you miss more than 3 classes during the semester, you may be overextended and should drop the class per the University attendance policy.
CLASS PARTICIPATION	Come prepared to actively participate in this course. This is the best way to engage you in learning the material (and it makes the lectures more interesting...	I hope you actively participate in this course. I say this because I found it is the best way to engage you in learning the material (and it makes the lectures more fun)...

Harnish 2011 p. 323

Does it truly hold that power? Is it plausible to improve our invitations for the adult learners to bring their full identity or selves into the course simply by adjusting the language or tone of the syllabus? The data seem particularly favorable. Table 1, extracted from Harnish 2011, offers ‘cold’ versus ‘warm’ ways to convey expectations to adult learners. Some simple edits in the approach show an instructor’s willingness to be a partner in the learning-teaching process as opposed to detached or disconnected guardians of knowledge.

Will a retooling of the syllabi in our credential and degree pathways solve retention issues we find across our campuses? Of course not, is it a plausible small but significant first step a program, unit, department, or college can address with faculty among a well-coordinated, long-range, multifaceted, embedded professional development plan aimed at unpacking the retooling of the full CIA approach for all curricular and instructional units on campus? Absolutely! It’s a starting place with so much room for growth and potential towards establishing a culture of belonging. Try it and reach out to me to share your experiences. I invite you to keep me posted.

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"The unit, department, or course instructor adopting a move toward equity-minded approaches is acknowledging the inherent social positioning of faculty in that setting historically and currently."

Pathways That Help Community College Students of Color and Adult Learners Transfer and Transition to Meet Their Personal Educational Dreams and Goals

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Transfer, laddering, pathways, stepping-stones, milestones, etc. are just a few of the ways that we as educators reference the process and journey that many students of color and adult learners experience advancing their education. The basic premise that higher education neglects to resolve in the discussion of student transition is the barriers that exist due to a history of academic pretentiousness displayed by universities toward community colleges. The reality is that education systems themselves erect the barriers under the guise of academic rigor and other ‘academic turn of phrase.’ The transfer rates are most notably lower for students of different ethnic, racial, or socio-economic backgrounds. Prioritizing student transfer and transitions that focus on students of color and adult learners, along with providing wrap-around services and culturally relevant practices reduces barriers that are particularly related to social and relational identities that influence ease of transfer such as timelines and trajectories.

The reality for community college students, particularly for those who have multi-barriers to overcome, is that transfer ecosystems in this country are arduous and challenging. For example, in the state where I work and reside in North Carolina, there are 691 institutional pathways for upward transfer. However, not all students understand and take these numerous and somewhat onerous primary routes; for example, in Fall of 2021, only 39.1% of transfer students followed primary feeder pathways. Many factors were identified in a study by Serratta, D’Amico, & Miller (2023), who utilized students’ voices about their transfer experience in their research, defined some of the influencers as credit mobility, transfer navigation, system complexity, exploration with a cost, & student identities describing how students experience transfer.

What are some of the solutions, you might ask? One of the most effective practices to smooth our transfer processes, particularly the relationship between partnerships and racial equity. Partnerships focused on doing what is best for students are those that are working to improve transfer initiatives through strong partnerships. This can be accomplished by walking shoulder to shoulder, with a collaborative spirit and mindset on programming and initiatives with community



colleges and the communities they serve. A strong example of authentic and collaborative partnerships is the UNCW/3C Collaborative. These partnerships are where the university and community colleges collaborate frequently by deeply listening and then connecting the strengths from trusting relationships to identify emerging opportunities in a 1+1=3 approach. Specifically meaning, group work produces more than any one individual contributes on their own.

Meeting the needs of students of color and adult learners is a primary strategy for high-performing transfer partnerships that improve the outcomes of transfer and career readiness and remove barriers for underserved students according to Yeh and Wetzstein (2022). In addition to ongoing and authentic communication and continued strong trusting and dynamic relationships, strong partners need also reflect on and share publicly available data to center the voice of students and conduct pre- and post-surveys on their transfer and/or education advancement experiences.

The Community College Undergraduate Research Experience (CCURE), hosted at The University of North Carolina Wilmington, is another opportunity to smooth out the transition for community college students into four-year institutions, providing culturally relevant, experiential learning that also fosters trust for students as they consider transferring. Again, the importance and value

of partnerships and collaboration in this work cannot be understated. As discussed by DeVita, Wiley, & Henning (2021), “While we hoped that we could bring about some meaningful change through the collaborations we supported, we did not fully understand the potential that existed in bringing community college and four-year institution stakeholders together to do this work”. Undergraduate research is considered a High Impact Practice (HIP) with goals to engage undergraduate students in applied research opportunities and can take on many forms of teaching and learning.

Opening pathways for community college students, particularly students of color and adult learners is urgent for the economic and overall success of our collective future. Every student—regardless of the program, should have a pathway to additional/life-long education - full stop. While many states fall behind the national average on some benchmarks in transferability, the growth in transfer initiatives such as CCURE shows there is promise and continued improvement in this area. A growing body of research related to student transferability is now available and being conducted. Some of these are linked below. The priority is to knock down obstacles and seek solutions to provide functional and equity pathways to educational success.

Further Resources

Community College Research Initiatives-

The Community College Research Initiatives (CCRI) group conducts research on equitable college access, progression and transfer, degree completion, and employment in living-wage careers for underserved students and diverse learner populations throughout the United States.

TRIO Programs- TRIO is a federal program that provides outreach and student services for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

UNCW/3C Collaborative- UNCW works collaboratively with community college partners to define needs and deliver professional development for community college professionals aspiring to step into roles as community college leaders.

Racial Equity for Adult Credentials in Higher Education (REACH) Collaborative-

In 2021, the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) partnered with Lumina to join the REACH Collaborative, which focuses on supporting Black, Hispanic, and Native American adults access postsecondary pathways.

Holistic Credit Mobility Framework- Ithaka S+R published an issue brief in 2022 focused on credit accumulation and best practices to ensure students are able to mobilize their credit to increase efficiency of transfer across institution types.

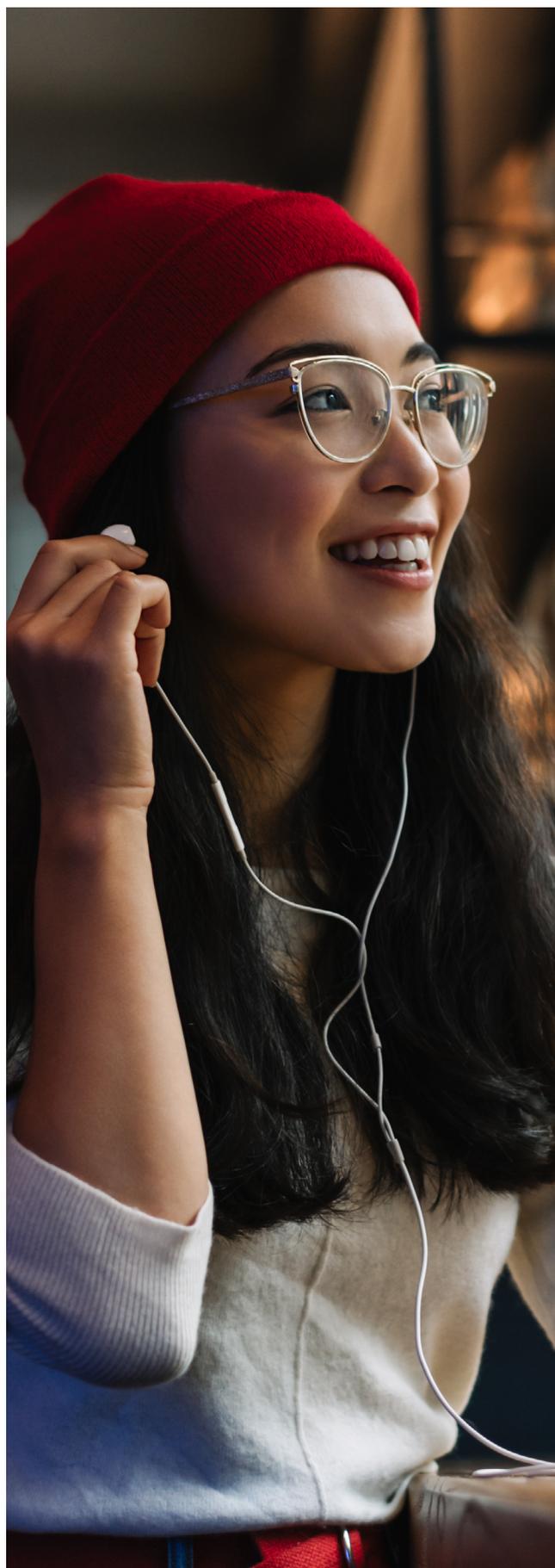
Transfer Blueprint Case Study & Report-

In 2019, Kent State and the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program worked together to develop degree pathways and a framework to support vertical transfer.

Rhode Island Legislation for Transfer Credit-

In Rhode Island, legislation requires credits earned at any public IHE to transfer to other RI public IHEs and specifically names that the credit must count toward degrees or credentials, rather than electives.

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Integrating Credit for Prior Learning: The Social Justice Student Leadership Certificate Program at Bronx Community College, The City University of New York

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Credit for Prior Learning in the Classroom: Curry Recipes, Football Jerseys & Poetry

At Bronx Community College, I start my Introduction to Modern World History course by spending more than a week asking students to reflect on their own histories. I begin by asking the students to interview each other. They write a short—a few paragraphs—history of their partner, which they then present to the class. Later in the week, each student brings an item—an object, a photo, video, or maybe something they've written—as a historical document about themselves. Students have shown up with a TikTok video of making a family curry recipe in their kitchen, a high school football jersey, a poem they have written, and photos—of graduation, of family reunions, of their children's birthday parties, of their ID cards. By opening the definition of sources and documents to highlight personal objects and creations, this exercise is an important step in incorporating the experiences of diverse communities, especially

racially minoritized adult learners, into the curriculum, shifting the dominance of white-centric texts that do not reflect their experiences. Further, this conversation centering on student experiences emphasizes their own authority and place in their education as emerging scholars.

I explain to students that this is more than a getting-to-know-you exercise. I am asking them to center themselves in the history we are learning, to recognize their own lived experiences as a contribution not only to their own education but to their academic community. Asking the students to do an interview—and then listening to how their story is retold by their colleagues—leads us to discuss how the questions we ask matter. The questions we ask structure the narratives we tell about ourselves—and about others. If the questions we ask do not center the experiences of BIPOC adult learners, then we fail to challenge narratives that serve to entrench white elite positions.

My point here is that, as a faculty member, I look for ways to integrate credit for prior learning or experiences, in addition to the actual number of credits a student might be awarded upon admission. Exercises like the one in my history course communicates that applying prior learning is ongoing, and contributes to a student's education throughout their academic career. Recognizing prior learning as a tool is especially crucial for the success of racially minoritized adult learners, whose experiences have been excluded from most so-called academic "canons." Awarding credit toward a degree or certification is significant, but building in other opportunities of applying prior learning and experience throughout a student's academic career strengthens the necessary connections between personal, professional, and academic goals.

Links to Prior Learning beyond the Classroom: The BCC Social Justice Network

In July 2020, students, faculty members, administrators and staff came together to form the [BCC Social Justice Network \(SJN\)](#).^{*} BCC has a [long history of social activism and protest](#). But even social justice programming had not avoided the silos often found on college campuses—which meant these programs were running more along parallel lines than intersecting. The summer of 2020 made structural societal racism even more clear by the effects of the [Covid 19 pandemic](#) and the [murder of George Floyd](#). These events prompted activists across campus to join efforts to better coordinate social justice work, headed by Associate Director of Student Life Tiffany Dubon-Yard. In addition to bringing together academic departments and administrative offices, SJN connected with faculty, staff, and student organizations, e.g. Womxn Up! Unity and Strength; Association of Latino Faculty and Staff, the LGBTQI center.

In its first year, SJN supported over [a dozen events](#) including on civic action, colorism, Black Lives Matter, vaccine hesitancy. Some events had over one hundred attendees. Students always asked—what's next? Are you doing this again? But we wanted to do more than offer workshops and events, and to recognize the time, love, and work

that went into organizing these events as well as the time, love, and work students were contributing in consistently attending and participating in these events. We wanted students to get "credit" for social justice work, work connected with their lives off campus.

Creating a New Infrastructure for Prior Learning: Certificate and Mentorship Program

In the fall of 2021, we^{**} launched the Social Justice Student Leadership (SJSJL) Certificate Series for students to be recognized for their participation in social justice programming. The certificate program has an application process and orientation session for all students who want to take part. Students then can choose from a series of workshops, and are required to complete a minimum of 5 workshops, with [3 from a core list and 2 from an elective list](#). Workshops were offered both in person and virtually, during day and evening hours to allow for the inclusion into our students' already full schedules. Students who complete the program have the opportunity to serve as SJN peer mentors the following year. The range of workshops embody the three core elements of the Social Justice Network: civic engagement, social justice, and radical wellness. To complete the program, students write a short reflective essay.

The design of this program gives a form of credits or credentialing that can go on a resume, if not translated directly into degree credits. The program is, at its heart, student and prior-learning centered. In building on students' experiences, the program adds infrastructural support as an institutionalized bridge between prior learning, learning on campus, and ongoing learning off campus and in students' professional lives. The program is a channel through which to formally link multiple expertises the students have when arriving to campus as well as those they gain. For example, the program provides space for the students to reflect on the inequities they may have faced as members of racially minoritized communities, and how they have advocated for themselves. The program then encourages them to build on their prior experience as advocates, honing their communication and

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leadership skills, as well as building their networks with other students in the SJN program.

These are all skills that they will use and develop further in their professional, post-collegiate lives.

The experience of the Social Justice Student Leadership Certificate program at BCC has further underscored that, in order to support an equitable post-secondary experience for adult learners of color, cooperation and change across disciplines is key. Reform in any one component—curriculum, administration, student life—can not ensure the broad infrastructural change needed for inclusivity and racial equity.

*SJN founders included a broad multidisciplinary and multi departmental group: Staff: Eugene Adams (Unity & Strength, Association of Black Faculty and Staff); Nathan Aiken (College Discovery), Nicole Benjamin (ASAP ,Accelerated Study in Associate Programs) Nadine Browne (Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, ASAP), Tiffany Dubon-Yard (Student Life), Yvonne Erazo-Davila (Student Success), Clifford Marshall II, Male Empowerment Network), Leidy Pichardo (Association of Latino Faculty and Staff, College Discovery), Cynthia Suarez-Espinal (College Discovery). Faculty: Grisel Y. Acosta (English), Leroy Gadsden (Criminal Justice); Monique A. Guishard (Psychology), Jacqueline Jimenez Polanco (Sociology), Prathibha Kanakamedala (History), Mara Lazda (History), Gloria Rodriguez (Psychology, Womxn Up!). Administrators: Bernard Gantt (Student Success), Nancy Ritze (Institutional Research), Angela Wambugu Cobb (Development), Karla Renee Williams (Workforce Development). Students: Student Government Association and Phi Theta Kappa members; Gabriel Morillo (SGA Legislator), Yamilet Martinez

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