

Strong Relationships



REACH | RACIAL
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ADULT
CREDENTIALS in
HIGHER ED

**REACH Equity Champion
Consultant Insights**



Quick-Bites for Training Student Service Professionals on Culturally Sustaining Processes

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Culturally Sustaining Processes involve a range of practices that acknowledge the different lived experiences of marginalized populations. Historically underrepresented populations may include low-income students, first-generation students, adult learners, students of color, and women in STEM, with students often having intersecting identities that include more than one category of marginalization. Seeking to build cultures of equity in community colleges involves a range of strategies for the different stakeholder groups. This blog focuses on student service professionals, who are on the front-line of interactions with marginalized students and who often fill roles of support for historically underrepresented populations of students, and are working toward equity-mindedness and building a sense of belonging for their students.

The REACH (Racial Equity for Adult Credentials in Higher Ed) Collaborative uses three pillars in its work and provides resources for each topic in a series of Practice Briefs: 1) Credentials to Degrees Pathways; 2) Bundled and Sequenced Supports, and 3) Culturally Sustaining Practices. The Culturally Sustaining Practices Briefs pose a series of questions for student services professionals and academic advisors to consider as they build sustaining cultures of support for students. Data and policy reviews are at the heart of these questions to set a context for the current status at the college.

Equity Mindedness

Estella Bensimon's long standing work on equity-mindedness builds on developing an inquiry-mindset. At the center of this equity work is understanding the ways in which historically underrepresented students are taking part in student events, organizations, and other activities occurring out of the classroom. Comparing who comes to out-of-class activities to the overall student population can increase awareness of equity gaps. Having an increased awareness of who is not coming can provide a way to change practices to become more inclusive.

Action Items

- Review participation data from clubs, events, organizations based on gender, race/ethnicity, age
- Examine institutional data based on gender, race/ethnicity, age, full-time/part-time status to understand the student profile and to understand who persists and graduates
- Conduct focus groups/surveys with students to learn what would best support them on campus
- Build a student resource list that is broadly shared on campus so student services professionals can direct students to needed

services better—prevents students from feeling the run around

- Undergo implicit bias training to increase awareness of personal biases and engage in ongoing learning to understand better how to support historically underrepresented students

Resources

- [Culturally Responsive-sustaining Education Framework](#)
- [Advising & Student Supports](#)
- [Helping Underserved Students at Higher Performing iPASS Colleges: An Exploration of Support Practices](#)
- [Implementing Caring Campus With Nonacademic Staff: Lessons from Participating Colleges](#)

Sense of Belonging

When students feel like they belong at the community college, and they have a system of support, they are more likely to succeed. According to Strayhorn (2012), a sense of belonging for students includes a “perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g. campus community) or others on campus (e.g. faculty, peers)” (p. 3). Equity champions on campus can help foster a sense of belonging among students, and many student services professionals already fill these roles.

Action Items

- On an individual level, engage with students when you are out on campus—learn names, ask them questions about why they are at the college, understand their needs
- On a collective level, develop processes and safety nets to connect students to needed services and available college resources
- Look at your college’s CCSSE data or conduct

a college survey to see how students feel engaged on campus

- Identify roadblocks facing students and build a plan to change existing barriers
- Build advising practices that are developmental and inclusive, and help streamline course taking by partnering with academic leaders

Resources

- [How Relationships Support and Inform the Transition to Community College](#)
- [Fostering the Sense of Belonging Promotes Success](#)
- [Developing a Sense of Belonging in Community College Students](#)
- [Community College Survey of Student Engagement](#)

Reference

Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students’ sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. Taylor & Francis.

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"When students feel like they belong at the community college, and they have a system of support, they are more likely to succeed."

On Being Overwhelmed

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In my forthcoming book, [Restorative Resistance in Higher Education: Leading in an Era of Racial Awakening and Reckoning](#) (Harvard Education Press, 2023), I explore the burden of fighting for racial equity and justice in colleges and universities. Often born by practitioners and scholars from historically underrepresented and marginalized communities, this phenomenon was labeled “[cultural taxation](#)” by Stanford psychologist Amado Padilla in the 1990s:

This “taxation” poses a significant dilemma for ethnic scholars because we frequently find ourselves having to respond to situations that are imposed on us by the administration, which assumes that we are best suited for specific tasks because of our race/ethnicity or our presumed knowledge of cultural differences. This taxation takes many forms, with some being easier to identify than others.

For years, I have [lectured](#), [written](#), and [led workshops](#) on cultural taxation. There are usually two general responses: among underrepresented folks, a weary acknowledgement of their experiences in historically/traditionally/predominantly White institutions (sometimes tinged with an appreciation that they are not alone); and among majority folks, surprise that there is a name (and scholarship!) around the phenomenon and a desire to minimize or eliminate it altogether.

These responses have only intensified in recent years with the withering attacks from right wing legislatures and media on scholarship focused on racial equity and justice ([Critical Race Theory bans](#)) and institutional efforts to create welcoming and supporting climates for marginalized groups ([bans](#)

[and elimination of diversity, equity, and inclusion offices](#)). As a fellow traveler and practitioner of DEI and belonging work, I have witnessed countless staff, faculty, students, and administrators create structures to support equitable environments for three decades, including several years as a research assistant for the [Harvard National Campus Diversity Project](#). It is painful to see these efforts—sacrifices—reduced to another salvo in cruel cultural skirmishes, where [the intent is to inflict damage](#) rather than increase tolerance and understanding. Racially minoritized adult learners have seen the retreat from the commitment to a more equitable America—from the election of President Obama and the Supreme Court decision supporting racial diversity in higher education in the Fisher v. University of Texas case—to the current “war on woke” and likely erosion of affirmative action from the Roberts court.

The [REACH collaborative brings together teams from six states](#) that represent the broad array of champions and challengers in the policy sphere. As we speak about how we support student development and equity, we also must acknowledge the unique circumstances in our regions, states, and locations. Importantly, this is a time where our collaborations, networks, and support systems are more critical than ever. We are preparing students for careers and futures that are beyond jurisdictional boundaries. As the [Boyer 2030 Commission Report provokes](#), “Will we prioritize transformative education for life, work, and citizenship in an age of daunting challenges in need of world-embracing solutions? Will we ensure such education for all students, not only those already privileged?” A student who attends high school in Colorado may attend community college

in California and Texas, then start their career in North Carolina and settle in New York by way of Virginia. They will have friends and family across the country and world and engage with colleagues from a range of backgrounds and identities. Our work towards racial equity and justice is an affirmation of this reality.

Given the taxing drain and the assaults on academic freedom, how do we armor for an age of ascent? Our work in each state is critical to [“nurture, defend, and sustain the democracy of the United States.”](#) as Presidential Medal of Freedom recipient and former University of Texas at Brownsville president Juliet V. Garcia has stated. In the challenging days ahead, I have some thoughts about how we go about the work of creating sustainable and supportive communities for our students and their families.

Reframing as Resistance. One of the unfortunate results of the media environment is that sound bites and twenty-second explanations rule the day. Community college and higher education leaders work tirelessly to enhance our democracy through programs and efforts that support racially minoritized adult learners. At the same time, these critical interventions are parodied, misunderstood, and lazily labeled as “woke” by biased parties with little knowledge of what this work entails. We often find ourselves defensively defining terms to an audience who has had a steady stream of disinformation. I have found that reframing our work often provides an opportunity to move towards a more nuanced understanding of racial equity work.

A few years ago, a college friend asked me to speak to the leadership council of the Republican Party in my community—and I very nearly elected to not give the talk. I had been attacked by members of this group on social media—how likely would it be that I could have a reasonable discussion? After talking with mentors, I decided to go forward with the meeting. I arrived to find one of my social media detractors unsuccessfully attempting to “deplatform” me from the talk. However, I was able to deliver remarks and engage in conversation because I centered solutions around maximizing

human potential. Given the inequities in our students’ schooling and socioeconomic status – closely correlated to race and ethnicity – how else would we create opportunities to tap into their limitless human capital? By providing resources, mentoring, and support where we could. I ended the talk with a discussion among many attendees. Let me not oversell this—I don’t think many would identify as supporters of racial equity work. But we did open a window of dialogue and I was able to debunk some misinformation about standards and who we served in our programs.

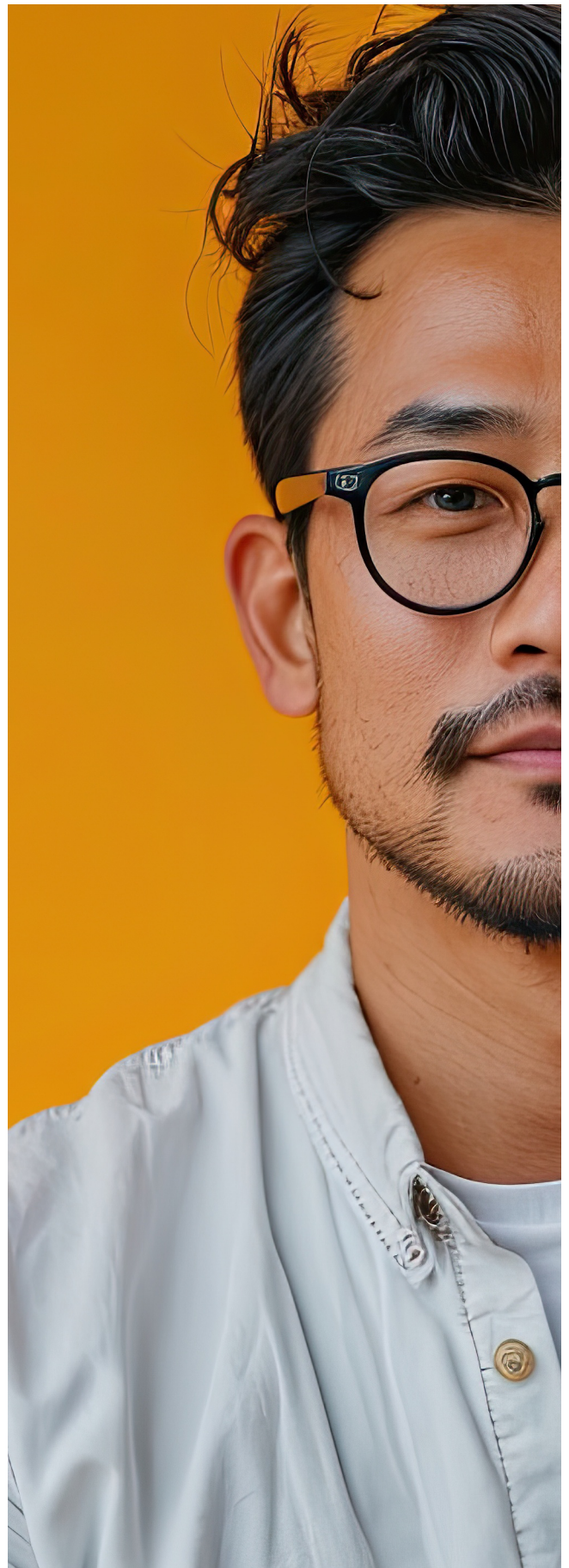
Equity for Everybody. I take issue with the framing that working towards racial equity is preferential to students of color. As a public institution, our programs serve all students, even if our efforts are focused on improving the experience of underrepresented students. Decades ago, I worked as an undergraduate student in a student success program, though focused on Black and Latino/a students, that partnered with other groups and even welcomed students from other identities. Today, I see the [principles of universal design](#) applicable to racial equity work—if we can improve experiences and outcomes for underrepresented groups on campus, many of those same efforts will help all students.

Another critical clarification is the fact that our students and families are more than one immutable identity characteristic. Racial equity work addresses the [intersecting identities](#) students, particularly our racially minoritized adult learners, bring to our campuses. Low income, first generation, rural, neurodivergent, veterans – these identities often are aspects of our students’ experiences. Not to mention having student success equitably distributed across all student populations means there are more peers who can mentor each other, and whose leadership skills can positively impact their colleagues. I’m reminded of one of my students who arrived on campus feeling isolated and disconnected. Through community engagement experiences and mentoring, this student became an orientation advisor on our campus, welcoming students from various backgrounds and serving as a role model and mentor for many. This student

is an example of the multiplicative impact of creating a sense of belonging. Racial equity work has the potential to ripple throughout the campus and locality, making our institutions beneficial for students on campus and the broader community. [More role models, mentors, and community engaged citizens](#) rewards us all.

Radical Hope. [Laurien Alexandre](#) states that radical hope—[how the Crow Nation persists despite the overwhelming threats to their way of life](#)—is the counterweight to radical evil. Throughout history, the darkest moments brought us the brightest inspiration. Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, Paolo Freire, and Barbara Jordan are some of the inspirations I look to in times like these. The pursuit of justice and equity is not for the weak or timid. We have to face the headwinds with courage, but we do this work in collaboration with each other. The work can only be sustained if we care for ourselves and each other. Metaphorically, the words of W. E. Hendley’s “Invictus” might apply to us all—our heads are [“bloody, but unbowed.”](#) Our students, families, and communities demand racial equity to meet their fullest potential. Let that reality motivate us through the times ahead and leverage the beloved community that is REACH as we approach the challenges that this era presents us.

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