

Integrating Racial Equity

into Guided Pathways

Student
Success Center
**Coaching
Program**


Student Success Center
NETWORK



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The guided pathways model focuses on four pillars to improve student success: clarifying curricular pathways, getting students on the path, keeping students on the path, and making sure that learning is happening (Bailey, Jaggars, and Jenkins 2015). Many Student Success Centers (SSC) are employing coaching programs to help spread the impact of this model throughout the country. By preparing coaches to assist colleges in implementing reform that is intentionally focused on closing equity gaps, the opportunity to improve student retention, completion, and transfer may be greatly enhanced. Speaking to the end goal of ensuring that the benefits of guided pathways extend to student groups often marginalized from and underserved by higher education, McClenney (2019) offers a vision that links guided pathways to equity, saying,

At the heart of the guided pathways reform is a passionate commitment to achieving equity in college access and outcomes for students. As colleges fundamentally redesign students' educational experiences, they assume the professional and moral obligation to ensure that institutional policies and practices are specifically designed to promote equity—and conversely, to eliminate unintentional barriers, unconscious bias, and institutional racism. Ideally, every design decision is made with equity in mind. (p. 87)

McClenney (2019) also describes the comprehensive, large-scale reform required by the guided pathways approach by changing policies and practices that impede student success. While McClenny speaks to the obligation for equity-focused design decisions to be made under guided pathways, her description of the model itself—which is consistent with other explanations of the guided pathways model (see, for example, Bailey, Jaggars and Jenkins 2015)—does not address inequities for racially minoritized student groups,¹ nor does it describe the ways guided pathways could resolve racial inequities. Unless reforms identify explicitly how they will address racial disparities in student outcomes and undo structural racism that contributes to these disparities, it is unlikely that equity gaps will close (Bensimon 2017). Thus, this brief argues for the need to focus on racial equity in guided pathways work, to close racial equity gaps and increase the impact of the reform effort. It also discusses the unique position of community colleges to take on racial equity as it relates to their diverse composition and overall mission. The brief concludes with guiding questions for coaches or colleges around the four pillars of guided pathways as a tool for their equity work.

¹ We use the term “racially minoritized” versus “minority” or “students of color” as Benitez (2010) did, to acknowledge “the process [action vs. noun] of student minoritization” (p. 131) and the institutional and historical social construction of marginality.



The questions fall under areas important for practitioners engaging in efforts to build racial equity into their reform work; diversity, inclusion, equity, and equity-mindedness (see Bragg, Bauman, and Wetzstein 2019).

Guided pathways can be seen as a model *for* equity through its comprehensive approach to improving success for all students, but it is difficult to view it as a model that is *about* equity due to its silence on rectifying inequities for racially minoritized students, as well as other underserved groups. Writing a blog about equity and the guided pathways model, Bailey (2018) observed of colleges that implement guided pathways that, “even if [the colleges] increase success for most students, colleges committed to equity cannot assume that they will close gaps in outcomes.” Indeed, early data on guided pathways’ results support Bailey’s argument that guided pathways reforms may not close racial equity gaps (Jenkins 2018). To this point, Jenkins (2018) noted that the guided pathways model has contributed to “substantial improvements for students of color; however, the achievement of white students has also increased, [meaning] achievement gaps sometimes persist.” Jenkins’ (2018) blog states it is still unclear from the data whether the guided pathways model will be able to close racial equity gaps in order

to achieve success for all students.

Looking more deeply at this question of equity in the guided pathways model, Bensimon (2017) noted that, without acknowledging the structural racism that is foundational to higher education, it will not be possible to eliminate inequities. She specifically describes the race-neutral approach to guided pathways (also indicative of most higher education reform) as problematic, arguing instead for a critical-race perspective to reform. Bensimon contends there are many reasons race is not identified directly in reforms: people not wanting to talk about race, a belief that racism is no longer a problem, and normalizing “all students” as “the experience of white students” (p. 11). Bensimon (2017) also points out the predominance of non-minoritized scholars in researching and writing about college reform, calling for authors who write about reform to cite the work of scholars of color who lead these critical conversations. Because higher education continues to embed structural racism, along with predominance of white norms, in multiple ways (e.g., media, practical information, academic literature), Bensimon (2018) contends, “A critical race consciousness, therefore, is the only appropriate and necessary stance from which to address the consequences of whiteness as the ruling logic of higher education reforms

and create genuine equity” (p. 97).

Thus, when reforms do not deliberately identify ways they will address racial disparities and improve student outcomes in college retention, completion, and credentialing, it is difficult to see how they will close equity gaps between racially minoritized students and white students. Bensimon’s (2018) thesis requires an explicit focus on race to reduce racial disparities, and also recognizes that deeper work on racial inequities is some of the most difficult work colleges can do. Promoting constructive dialogue about race is challenging no matter when or where it takes place but it is essential to developing a common understanding of the problem and to identifying solutions to close equity gaps. Race-conscious dialogue can start with the use of common language around terms such as diversity, inclusion, equity, and equity-mindedness.

We acknowledge that racial equity work requires a heavy lift for most colleges and particularly for those where the racial makeup of the faculty is different from students, where demographics are shifting to where the majority of students identify as racial minorities, and where racial tensions persist or grow. For these colleges, efforts to move forward with racial equity-focused reform are urgent. Delaying institutional efforts to address

racial inequities may add to the challenges racially minoritized students face, leaving them to shoulder the burden of navigating the college experience without adequate support. As described by Gorski (2019), “Implementing a transformative racial equity commitment is difficult, especially if we face significant resistance. Of course, it is not more difficult than navigating racism, which many students, families, and educators of color endure” (p. 61). It should also be noted, as Harper (2009) argues, these racial equity practices will also positively impact the whole institution, as they move the focus away from changing the students, to exploring how institutional practices could create more equitable outcomes. Also faculty and staff gain from authentic interactions with their students, and the institution gains by increasing student success outcomes.



To bring about transformative change that results in more equitable outcomes, colleges need to do deep, reflective work to understand how to remove hurdles and create supports that their students need. McNair et al. (2016) recommend that colleges move away from the student deficit model that focuses on making students college ready and to become “student-ready” colleges that are structured and operated in ways that all students can learn. McNair et al. argue that shifting attitudes toward being student ready require that college leaders create space where institutions can reveal their most foundational values, beliefs, and assumptions and use critical reflection to create plans for action.

It's worth talking about campus values and beliefs, about attitudes toward change, about unexamined assumptions and biases. From time to time, reflection on campus ethos is helpful and can lead to action. Leaders can invite colleagues to be compassionate, self-reflective, and empathetic, to be creative, nimble, and dynamic. (McNair et al. p. 159)

Community colleges have an advantage over other higher education institutions in that they are designed to enhance college access, potentially aligning their

core mission to value diversity, inclusion, equity, and equity-mindedness. Created as open-access institutions, community colleges strive to help students who enroll from surrounding communities to attain education that provides an economic foothold to a better life for themselves and their families and communities. However, community colleges are not exempt from being impacted by persistent racial inequities embedded in the culture and norms of higher education. It takes more than open access to create equity in higher education.

The choice to address racial disparities is important now, but will only become more urgent over time. As our demographics shift, if institutions are not making changes that facilitate the success of their racially minoritized students who may someday be the majority, what will that mean to the institution and their desire for student success? The move toward a student-ready, racial equity-focused institution, requires understanding racially minoritized students' lived realities and how the institutional practices, norms, and policies impact student success. These types of institutional changes can create more equitable student outcomes in our community colleges.

How Colleges and Coaches Can Integrate Racial Equity into Guiding Pathways

The guided pathways model offers four areas, sometimes called pillars, in which to focus college change. The pillars help coaches and colleges organize essential practices into coherent strategic actions to improve student success. Central to this work is bringing college policies, programs, and practices into closer alignment with student needs while reforming the colleges to be more efficient and effective. In this section, we summarize the pillars representing essential practices of the guided pathways model, and we offer guiding questions that coaches and colleges should use to examine and enhance the alignment of diversity, inclusion, equity, and equity-mindedness with the model.

We focus our questions around these four concepts because of their importance to comprehensive college reform that closes racial equity gaps and positively impacts student outcomes. By **diversity**, we mean the representation of individuals and groups identified by socially constructed norms and characteristics. Diversity embraces the idea that individuals have intersecting identities across multiple groups, and that different histories, backgrounds, and experiences need to

be considered to improve education.

The concept of **inclusion** goes farther by recognizing the need for marginalized populations to be part of decision making and share power in the creation of policies, practices, and norms. **Equity** means student outcomes can no longer be predicted by racial identity. **Equity-mindedness** describes practitioners who recognize the harm of institutional racism and thus iteratively question, assess and act to resolve practices, policies, and norms that create inequities for racially minoritized student groups (Bensimon, Dowd, and Witham 2016; Witham et al. 2015). For a more thorough discussion of the diversity to equity-mindedness continuum, see *Coaching for More Equitable Student Outcomes* (Bragg, Bauman, and Wetzstein 2019).

Utilizing this continuum, we have provided two guiding questions for each pillar that center on understanding how patterns of systemic and organizational infrastructure, policies, programs, and practices, influence outcomes for racially minoritized students. We offer these questions to help coaches guide colleges in dialogue and critical reflective practice concerning organizational change.

Clarifying the Path

The first pillar is “clarifying the path to students’ end goals” (McClenney 2019, 94). This essential practice focuses on simplifying students’ choices by providing them with program maps that clearly show pathways to completion at the associate’s level, transfer to the baccalaureate and beyond, as well as employment. As noted, an important aspect of this pillar is helping students to develop transfer pathways by aligning associate’s-level courses with the learning outcomes of transfer-receiving colleges and universities to ensure credits transfer toward the bachelor’s degree. When considering the focus of this pillar, we offer coaches and colleges two questions for each pillar pertaining to diversity, inclusion, equity and equity-mindedness (*see Table 1*).

TABLE 1
Questions to Align Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, and Equity-Mindedness to Clarifying the Path

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Diversity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the college know about the backgrounds, experiences, and aspirations of diverse student groups? • What do we know about how program maps work for diverse student groups? |
| Inclusion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are the values, norms, and dispositions of diverse student groups represented in chosen pathways? • How are diverse students, as well as diverse faculty and staff, engaged and empowered to participate in program mapping and pathway reforms? |
| Equity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the college know about how racially minoritized students enroll, transfer, and complete pathways? • Looking at specific pathways, what changes are being made to improve the outcomes of racially minoritized students? |
| Equity-Mindedness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are practitioners (re)framing to recognize the assets racially minoritized students bring to their college experience? • How are practitioners supporting racially minoritized groups to understand benefits they may experience by better understanding pathways? |

Choosing the Path

The second pillar focuses on helping students choose and enter a pathway. It includes alignment between K-12 education and higher education, including ensuring that developmental education accelerates students into college credit-bearing course work that leads to completion and credentials. Exploration of college and career options is part of this set of essential practices, including the development of foundational skills and knowledge to support student success. When working toward implementation of essential practices associated with this pillar, coaches and colleges should consider the following questions pertaining to diversity, inclusion, equity and equity-mindedness (see Table 2).

TABLE 2

Questions to Align Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, and Equity-Mindedness to Choosing the Path

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Diversity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does the college know about the communities (schools, social, cultural and faith-based organizations, and others) where diverse students live and work? • How fully do pathways reflect the aspirations, goals, and desired outcomes of diverse student groups? |
| Inclusion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are the values, norms, and dispositions of diverse student groups represented in college and career advising about pathways? • How are diverse students, as well as diverse faculty and staff, empowered to support the pathway choices that diverse students make? |
| Equity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do racially minoritized students enroll, transfer, and complete pathways? • What changes will be made to improve racially minoritized students' success in navigating transfer pathways, both at the associate's and baccalaureate levels? |
| Equity-Mindedness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will practitioners (re)frame their work with guided pathways so that racially minoritized students are recognized for their assets? • How will practitioners who teach and support racially minoritized students advocate for their increased success? |

Staying on the Path

This set of essential practices focuses on improving advising processes, often aligned with holistic student services, so that students can make better decisions about college majors, course-taking, and related college experiences. The strategies included in this pillar also include enhancing what students know about transfer and career opportunities while they are engaged as students so that they can focus on successfully completing their end goals. The development of individualized student plans with clearly identified schedules that stretch over several (or all) terms rather than just the most immediate, are designed so that progress can be measured and monitored, and support can be provided if students steer off track. When working toward implementation of essential practices associated with this pillar, coaches and colleges should consider the following questions pertaining to diversity, inclusion, equity, and equity-mindedness (see Table 3).

TABLE 3
Questions to Align Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, and Equity-Mindedness to Staying on the Path

| | |
|--------------------------|---|
| Diversity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> To what extent do the faculty and staff who are involved in advising reflect the demographics, backgrounds, and experiences of diverse student groups? What do diverse learners know about college majors, course-taking, and other aspects of the college experience, and how are advising processes being reformed to address these differences? |
| Inclusion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How are the values, norms, and dispositions of diverse student groups represented in college and career advising? How does advising support the ways racially minoritized students need to be able to navigate pathways to achieve successful outcomes? |
| Equity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How does the institution understand its role in improving completion according to patterns of enrollment by racially minoritized student groups (disaggregated by group) compared to the majority student group? How are reforms impacting racially minoritized student groups (disaggregated by group) compared to the majority student group? |
| Equity-Mindedness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are practitioners doing to actively support the guided pathway reforms to improve outcomes for racially minoritized student groups? How will practitioners who teach and support racially minoritized students advocate for their increased success? |

Ensuring Learning

This pillar offers a set of essential practices to improve teaching and learning by linking learning outcomes to student-focused curricular and instructional practices. The pillar mentions the importance of feedback loops measuring student learning and informing faculty and staff to further improve pedagogical strategies to improve student learning. Strategies to integrate high-impact practices such as collaborative learning projects, learning communities, group projects, and internships fit into this pillar, with the paramount goal of ensuring that efforts to support student success include improved learning, both inside and outside of the classroom. When working toward implementation of essential practices associated with this pillar, coaches and colleges should consider the following questions pertaining to diversity, inclusion, equity, and equity-mindedness.

TABLE 4

Questions to Align Diversity, Inclusion, Equity, and Equity-Mindedness to Ensuring Learning

| | |
|--------------------------|--|
| Diversity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what extent do the pedagogical strategies resonate with the demographics, backgrounds, and experiences of diverse student groups? • How do diverse learners achieve in reformed classrooms? |
| Inclusion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is culturally responsive teaching and learning being deployed to meet the learning needs of diverse student groups? • How are diverse faculty and staff engaged and empowered in culturally responsive teaching and learning and how is it impacting students inside and outside of classrooms? |
| Equity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How is critical pedagogy being used to meet the learning needs of diverse student groups and making structural inequities visible? • How are diverse faculty and staff empowered in critical pedagogy teaching and learning impacting students inside and outside of classrooms? |
| Equity-Mindedness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are practitioners dismantling curricular and instructional policies and practices that disadvantage racially minoritized students? • How are practitioners being trained to effectively lead and deal with issues of equity inside and outside of the classroom? |



An important place to start comprehensive college reform is to recognize that students enroll in higher education having unique characteristics, assets, and aspirations that need to be understood and supported if they are to succeed. When recognition of the whole student is genuine, deep, and pervasive, colleges set the stage to improve performance. We contend that colleges that make concerted efforts to integrate diversity, inclusion, equity, and equity-mindedness into guided pathways will be better positioned to close equity gaps and therefore improve the success of all students.

It is through increased understanding of who the students are, what they seek to achieve, and how they are empowered to engage, that practitioners can begin to identify structures and norms that promote or impede student success. Transforming colleges to be more student-focused requires deliberate action to find and reform institutional policies and practices where inequities reside, especially in places and spaces that are masked because of historic patterns that serve the majority well enough for institutions to get by over time.

Tools and Resources for Integrating Equity into Guided Pathways

To further support and encourage integrating equity into guided pathways, Community College Research Initiatives has developed equity tools that assist coaches, colleges, SSC leadership in understanding, preparing for, and applying equity into guided pathways. These tools are introduced briefly below, and full copies can be downloaded from CCRI's website, <https://www.washington.edu/ccri/research-to-practice/c4c/equity>, for use by colleges.

CCRI Tools for Supporting Equity in Guided Pathways

Enacting Equity in Guided Pathways

This tool is for SSC leadership to gather input and prepare their coaches to integrate and enact an equity frame in guided pathways implementation. Coaches are encouraged to use *Five Principles for Creating Equity by Design* (Center for Urban Education 2019) to engage in critical reflection using *why*, *what*, and *how* to assess the integration of equity in the implementation of guided pathways by their colleges. Coaches learn to help their colleges to develop a statement of the college's current enactment of equity in guided pathways and provide a statement of next steps in the college's implementation of equity in guided pathways.

Assessing College Commitment to Equity

Coaches should use this tool to assess a college's commitment to equity by evaluating the college's own current public-facing statements and materials as a starting point for reflection. Colleges can critically analyze materials, looking for what is said and left unsaid about equity and engage in productive dialogue on alignment and misalignment of the college's commitment to equity. Using the information gathered with this tool, a college's future commitment to equity can be clarified and improved through setting priorities for collective action to advance an equity agenda. Colleges are encouraged to conduct this assessment at all levels (college, division, program, and personal) to provide the most comprehensive, institution-wide picture possible of a college's commitment to equity.

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