

Improving Racial Equity in Community College: Developing a Plan, Implementing the Vision

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California policymakers passed the Student Equity Policy, requiring all community colleges to develop a “student equity plan” that identified outcome disparities for select student groups, including racial/ethnic students. Through an instrumental case study, I examined Huerta College because their equity plan stood out for its focus on addressing Latinx transfer inequity. I spent two years interviewing implementers, observing equity meetings, and collecting documents that served as artifacts of implementation. Key to equity planning was a critical mass of Latinx practitioners able to see the policy as an opportunity to tackle one of the greatest inequities on their campus, Latinx transfer. They used the implementation process to propose new projects that would support Latinx students in their journey to transfer from Huerta.

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EDUCATION policy has been used as a tool to ameliorate inequitable conditions, experiences, and outcomes for racially minoritized students. Policies attempt to improve educational equity through design instruments such as mandates, inducements, capacity-building, system-changing tools, and hortatory language (Mattheis, 2016; McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). Some scholars suggest that policy reforms must include one or more of these essential instruments to motivate practitioners to implement policy intent, including improving equity in education (Ching et al., 2018; Cohen & Mehta, 2017; McLaughlin, 2006). In designing these reform efforts, few policies have the elements necessary for institutional leaders to follow the required change with fidelity (D. J. Baker, 2019). In California, the state has successfully passed a variety of progressive education policies designed to increase student success and equity in community college.

After the 2008 recession, California state policymakers began to craft several statewide initiatives to improve equity by targeting onboarding

and matriculation (SB-1456, 2012), redesign developmental education (AB-705, 2017), enhance transfer pathways (SB-1440, 2010), and improve completion efforts (AB-1809, 2018). In addition to these state-level mandates, the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office (CCCCO) developed a guiding “Vision for Success” outlining six priorities for institutions to close equity gaps across specific academic areas (CCCCO, 2017). Among these policies, one that stood out as unique was the Student Equity Policy (SEP) requiring all 116 community colleges to conduct campus-wide assessments to identify inequities in academic outcomes for target groups (e.g., gender, veteran status, former foster youth) and develop an institutional “equity plan” with strategies to address these inequities (SB-860, 2014). In addition to the mandate of equity planning, community colleges were provided with more than US\$785 million in funds between 2014 and 2019 to serve as an inducement to implement the new strategies or scale up efforts described in the equity plan to close outcome disparities on campus.

No single policy is a silver bullet that can fix inequities in education, but the SEP provides community colleges with an opportunity to create a “student equity plan” that examines their data to determine inequities and provides funds to propose new strategies to improve equity on their campus. Passed in 2014 and recently revised in 2017, the SEP requires every community college in the state to create and “maintain a student equity plan to ensure equal educational opportunities and promote student success for all students, regardless of race, gender, age, disability, or economic circumstances” (AB-1809, 2018). As a state-level reform, the SEP has levers of action for robust implementation through its inclusion of an equity-oriented mandate, fiscal resources to build institutional capacity, and mechanisms for evaluating and reporting progress.

SEP and the Opportunity to Address Racial Inequity

Of particular importance is the policy’s focus on achieving “equity” and the inclusion of racial/ethnic groups who have been systematically disadvantaged in higher education (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Harper, 2012). These two elements allow community colleges the opportunity to enact the policy in race-conscious ways, *if* a campus chooses to do so. A focus on racial equity is prompted, but not required. Scholars have noted that the policy and its implementation tend to result in race-neutral equity approaches that seek to support all students, although data trends in community college point to specific groups facing larger disparities, such as racially minoritized and low-income students (Chase et al., 2012; Long, 2016). Research examining early implementation of the policy found that campuses were able to identify disproportionate impact on racial/ethnic groups, but did not necessarily use the planning process or new funds to specifically target these racial equity gaps (Ching et al., 2018). Examining equity plans across the state, the author found that much of the potential for racial equity within the policy has been unexploited (Felix et al., 2018). In contrast, Huerta College¹ was identified as one of six community colleges in the state to use the reform explicitly to address racial disparities facing students of

color in key areas such as transfer and developmental education (Felix, 2020).

Huerta College provides a compelling site to learn how a student equity plan is developed and implemented over time. The campus enrolls more than 35,000 students, where more than 80% identify as Latinx.² Aligned with the student demographic, campus leadership overseeing implementation is comprised mostly of Latinx administrators and staff. At the same time, the institution has faced challenges in supporting transfer and completion success for Latinx students. Given the size and demographic, Huerta College has received a substantial amount of equity funds since 2014 to carry out their proposed efforts for improving equity. Reviewing all submitted equity plans, the college was distinctive in that it developed a plan with the intent to use the policy and planning process to create race-conscious strategies to mitigate Latinx transfer inequity.

I highlight Huerta College to understand the conditions that are necessary to enable race-conscious policy interpretation and implementation. Racial inequity in higher education, California and nationwide, is pervasive, and this study explores what prompted Huerta College to be more race-conscious in their approach rather than defaulting to the less risky pathway of “success for all students” (Ching et al., 2018, p. 23). Two research questions guided this work:

Research Question 1: What contextual factors supported Huerta College’s decision to propose a plan that would mostly benefit Latinx transfer aspirants?

Research Question 2: Once the plan was approved and funds were received, in what ways was the plan implemented to achieve the campus goals of improving Latinx transfer?

Answering these questions extends our knowledge of how policies are envisioned by institutional leaders and the conditions that shape how reform ultimately unfolds in practice. My findings are described in two sections covering the planning and implementation phases. I find that key to equity planning was a critical mass of Latinx practitioners who were able to see the policy as an opportunity to tackle one of the

greatest inequities on their campus, Latinx transfer. Although the campus crafted a Latinx-focused equity plan, however, implementers faced unanticipated challenges and roadblocks during the enactment process that delayed, if not disrupted, the efforts envisioned in the plan.

Education Policy, Planning Efforts, and Implementation Fidelity

California's SEP prompts community colleges to craft a plan to assess how well students are doing, evaluate campus programs and practices, propose potential interventions to improve outcomes, and encourage implementation fidelity through new fiscal resources. The student equity mandate aligns with a long history of state and federal reforms using planning as a lever for institutional change (Kezar, 2014). To situate this study within a broader academic framing, I review literature on educational planning initiatives, the implementation process, and the possibilities of advancing racial equity through these efforts.

Planning Efforts in Education

Planning is a strategy used by federal and state policymakers as well as accrediting agencies to prompt improvement of institutional and student outcomes (Hackman et al., 2019; Sun et al., 2017). Planning offers institutional leaders the opportunity to reflect on and revise existing practice, create a course of action for future success, and monitor progress on impact (Green, 2017; Redding & Searby, 2020). Strunk et al. (2016) share that planning is a "widespread practice," but little is known about the process or its effectiveness (p. 261). Much of the research around educational planning focuses on the product, a plan, rather than the process to create it. Reviewing planning literature in education, I categorized four different approaches seeking to improve performance (accountability), long-term stability (strategic), campus composition (diversity), or parity in outcomes (equity). What is clear is that all planning efforts require an articulated vision for institutional change and the creation of a detailed blueprint to achieve it (Kezar, 2014), but the process and product is shaped by the approach taken.

An accountability approach to planning focuses on performance and progress with the goal of improving student and institutional outcomes. Many of these plans are used to hold schools responsible for past performance and for detailing ways to increase academic achievement for all students (Hackman et al., 2019). Scholars also associate accountability efforts with the need to "turn-around" or support "struggling" schools (Strunk et al., 2016). Strategic planning takes a more business-oriented approach (Chance & Williams, 2009; Falqueto et al., 2019) requiring leaders to take into account demographic shifts, enrollment trends, economic forecasts, and future demands to keep the institution stable as well as to continuously improve in key institutional metrics such as enrollment size, graduation rates, and job placement.

Over the past two decades, diversity planning efforts have increased to address issues of composition, climate, and representation (Slay et al., 2019; Wilson, 2018). Based on demographics data of both the student and the faculty body, diversity plans establish priorities and propose strategies to improve aspects such as the admissions rate of underrepresented students or the diversification of the professoriate. Scholars note that diversity plans are important, but not sufficient to realizing intended change (Ching et al., 2018), as these efforts fail to acknowledge issues such as power, structural racism, or constrained capacity (Malen et al., 2015). Much less focus has been placed on equity planning, which seeks to fundamentally transform institutions (Capper & Young, 2015; Skrla et al., 2009). Leaders developing equity-oriented plans reflect on disaggregated data by race as well as other key demographics, consider how existing structures and practices perpetuate disparities, and seek to achieve parity in outcomes across student groups (Bensimon, 2012; byrd, 2019; Felix & Trinidad, 2020). Green (2017) shares that this approach requires planners to reconsider how the process leads to a more equitable school that explicitly serves "low-income, urban communities of color" (p. 5).

The SEP is unique in the sense that it requires elements across all four types of planning efforts described. Not only does it document performance in five areas³—access, basic skills progress, course completion, degree completion, and

transfer success—it also seeks to create a 3-year vision to reduce and eventually eliminate outcome disparities for underrepresented student groups. The combination of planning elements not only makes a comprehensive effort, but also a complex document to implement in practice.

Implementing Planning Efforts in Education

Scholars continuously use the phrase “best laid plans” to describe research documenting the enactment of well-intended plans (Allan et al., 2013; Britton, 2019; Hatch et al., 2018; Robson et al., 2016; Strunk et al., 2016) and the ability of leaders, institutions, and states to achieve the goals within them. In recent implementation studies, researchers use the phrase to note the “distance between expectations and outcomes” of planning (Britton, 2019, p. 4). Although planning has long been used in education, research shows mixed results in achieving intended change (Felix et al., 2018; Strunk et al., 2016). When analyzing implementation of planning mandates seeking complex change, there is a need to examine the context in which these efforts are enacted. In particular, three areas shape planning implementation: the design of planning effort, the institutional context where plan is embedded, and the leaders overseeing the process (Morimoto & Guillaume, 2018). Without careful attention to these factors, the intent of a plan can be easily subverted, diluted, or missed in the implementation process (Brady et al., 2014).

Design of Planning Effort. Understanding the design of planning reform and how it structures and incentivizes the intended change it seeks is critical to studying policy implementation. Many efforts are derailed before implementation even begins when planning mandates have a weak design or fail to include fiscal resources to support the initiative. Planning mandates must balance top-down and bottom-up approaches, allowing for individual sites to create a local and contextualized vision for future academic success, while also fulfilling state- or federal-level goals for these efforts. To address inequity, planning efforts need to account for the level of change required by including strong “levers of action” (e.g., clear mandates, motivating inducements, capacity-building tools)

that could absorb the “normative and political pressures” from school leaders who are resistant to change (Trujillo, 2012, p. 531). These studies highlight the challenges to implementing reforms that call attention to inequities, but fail to have the necessary design elements or policy instruments to actually address them (Oakes et al., 2005). To effectively implement planning efforts, reforms need to include fiscal resources or capacity-building tools (Malen et al., 2015).

Institutional Context. A second factor shaping plan implementation is the institutional context of each campus. In her examination of planned change in a Wisconsin community college, Chase (2016) found that institutional identity and history played a significant role in implementation. These elements are the “DNA” of an institution and help to explain why and how institutions operate and respond to policy mandates in different ways. Schein (1990) adds that institutional histories are deeply rooted and remind the community of what has been done before and how it has been done. According to Weerts et al. (2014), each institution develops a unique personality that is shaped by its mission (e.g., liberal arts education, vocation-oriented, comprehensive), the community (e.g., urban area serving low-income students or rural area focused on workforce development), and the students they serve (e.g., primarily Latinx, first-generation, adult reentry). At times, planning efforts are designed by a small group of leaders that fails to account for how the newly developed vision will align or clash with the broader campus community as well as the institution’s long-standing history, identity, values, and practices. Planning leaders must be aware of institutional context and look to their campus history and values as a guidepost for making decisions (Chase, 2016), particularly when proposing new or different strategies that shift from existing efforts (Nienhusser, 2014).

Planning Leaders. Finally, implementation efforts are significantly shaped by the individuals overseeing the process (Allan et al., 2013; Kezar, 2014). Recent research documents how planning leaders tend to establish a vision for change, but fail to include necessary details, strategies, and accountability mechanisms for implementation

success. Strunk and colleagues (2016) have found that the quality of the plan (details on change efforts, listing individuals responsible for change) has a positive relationship with implementation fidelity. Other scholars note that the effectiveness of plans depends upon the skill of the planner and the capacity, experience, and willingness they possess to create a comprehensive plan for improvement (Felix & Ramirez, 2020; Nienhuser, 2018). Developing a plan sets the direction for improving institutional and student outcomes, but implementation is the long journey taken to reach that destination. Implementation success is reliant on a strong planning mandate, supportive institutional context, and having planners with the skill to navigate the campus terrain and unforeseen roadblocks ahead to reach that destination (Brady et al., 2014; Ching et al., 2018).

Possibilities for Race-Conscious Approaches to Planning Efforts

Given the critical importance of community colleges in the U.S. higher education system and the known disparities faced by racially minoritized students in this sector (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Malcom, 2013), this study explicitly explores the ways practitioners see the racial possibilities in the student equity planning mandate and proceed to implement that vision (Dumas, 2016). For the first time, language in the SEP provides institutions the discretion to be race-conscious in their planning process, *if* they choose to do so. The statutes that govern Student Equity Plans (§§78220–78222) list “American Indians or Alaskan natives, Asian, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, White” as categories of students to “determin[e] student equity and disproportionate impact” to “ensure equal educational opportunities and to promote student success” (AB-943, 2019). The SEP, as well as its planning mandate, offers an opportunity for individual community colleges to recognize the racial disparities on campus, but more importantly prompts them to use newly allocated resources to address the inequities identified. The review of the literature on education planning and implementation underscores the importance of contextual influences that shape the process

and outcomes of these reform efforts. When it comes to studying both phases of planning mandates that press for complex and transformative change, contextual factors such as how a policy is designed, where the policy lands, and who is in charge of the effort matter.

Theoretical Framework

Guided by a multicontextual theoretical framework of policy implementation (see Figure 1), I explored the institutional conditions that enabled Huerta College to craft a plan that was transparent in its focus on racial equity, particularly for Latinx students, and then how practitioners moved forward with implementing the plan with fidelity. This approach seeks to broaden the range of theories and theoretical elements included to help researchers uncover the “complex social processes” between policymakers, implementers, and perceived policy beneficiaries (Calderón et al., 2012; Koyama, 2015).

Central to my theoretical approach is the concept that educational institutions have an enactment zone shaped by contextual factors, such as institutional culture or the background of individual implementers, that can restrict, resist, or enable the implementation of equity-minded reform (Oakes et al., 2005). According to Chase (2016), the ability of contextual aspects, such as institutional factors and individual actors, to shape implementation is understudied. These elements are particularly important for researchers studying the benefits of equity-minded reforms in diverse higher education settings. Scholars have used the concept of enactment zones to understand why some educational institutions implement equity-oriented policies in robust ways, whereas others actively resist the intended changes. I underscore four contextual areas—(a) policy context, (b) organizational context, (c) agentic role of implementers, and (d) collective space—to understand the enactment zone at Huerta College and the conditions that facilitated and inhibited the ability of campus leaders to enact policy in more race-conscious ways. The components included in my theoretical framework are the most salient factors found in the literature reviewed related to policy implementation, enactment of equity-minded reforms, and higher education policy (Nienhuser, 2018).

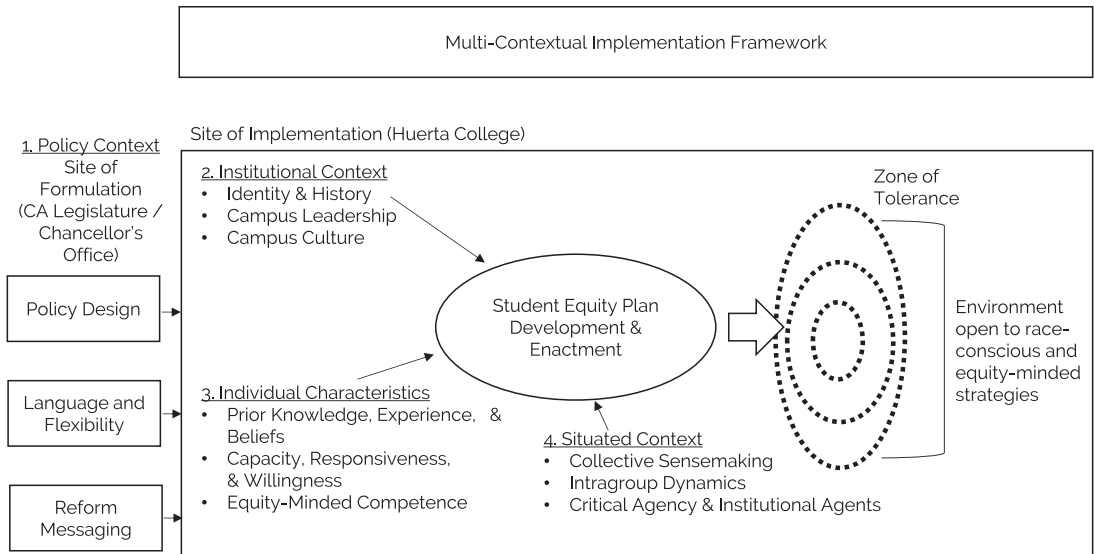


FIGURE 1. *Multicontextual implementation framework.*

As Hurtado and colleagues (2012) note, multi-contextual frameworks are more explicit than previous ones in education, allowing the researcher to account for macro- and micro-level factors in colleges and universities.

Despite a long history of studying educational reform, researchers point to various reasons why these reforms have not achieved their desired result, or in the words of Derrick Bell (2004), have left “unfilled hopes of racial reform” (p. 185). Oakes and colleagues (2005) argue that most of the literature in educational policy research has focused on examining “normatively and politically neutral, technical school reforms” that seek to improve equity without addressing challenges local actors face within implementation sites (p. 282). Chase (2016) adds that studies examining implementation in education have not focused on the influence of “settings” and “people” and how both factors contribute to how policy unfolds in colleges. Some scholars argue that traditional approaches to analysis constrain our understanding of the implementation process by failing to acknowledge social context (Coburn, 2016) and why policies, as implemented, have differential (negative) effects on racially minoritized students (Dumas & Anyon, 2006; Harper, 2015; Young & Diem, 2017). These studies highlight several shortcomings in analyzing educational policy implementation and underscore my

rationale for developing a different way forward, including emphasizing social context and how these factors influence implementation and ability to achieve intended goals, and thus highlighting the need for new theoretical approaches to learn how and why policy unfolds differently across higher education settings.

Through this framework, I can explore both external and internal factors that influence and shape how a campus responds and reacts to equity-oriented policy efforts (Cohen & Mehta, 2017). For instance, policy context explores the precision and flexibility of the language used within a reform and the discretion institutions have to interpret the intent, goals, and change required by the reform. Institutional context examines the site of implementation and how existing factors (i.e., campus leadership, organizational identity, shared values) shaped the implementation on campus. Individual context focuses on the beliefs, experiences, and prior knowledge of implementation actors (Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018). Finally, situated context explores how individuals came together as a collective to guide the implementation of equity-minded reform through the zone of tolerance on their campus. Overall, this framework provides the opportunity both to highlight contextual factors that influence how policy gets implemented and to learn what factors widen

the zone of tolerance to allow for race-conscious planning.

The zone of tolerance is where institutional and external forces shape what implementers can do to develop equity-oriented reform (Oakes et al., 2005). For example, if there is alignment between contextual factors, then implementers have a larger zone of tolerance available to them to develop reform in ways that can meet the intended goals of the policy, such as addressing racial disparities in educational outcomes. If, however, the reform is not seen as acceptable or contextual factors are in opposition, then the zone of tolerance is smaller and thus restricts what can be achieved by implementing actors. Depending on the implementation setting, a community college may be comprised of contextual factors that expand or constrict their zone of tolerance for more equity-oriented policies and race-conscious strategies. By highlighting these contextual factors, I describe how planners at Huerta seized the opportunity to address racial inequity on campus and create race-conscious and culturally relevant programs for transfer-aspiring Latinx students, but also how long-standing institutional roadblocks made effective implementation difficult.

Research Design

To answer my research questions, I conducted an instrumental case study of Huerta College's implementation of the SEP, which proceeded in two phases: (a) the development of an equity plan and (b) the enactment of the equity efforts within that plan. An instrumental case study (Stake, 2005) allowed me to select and study a specific case that may illuminate how a community college is able to implement policy in race-conscious ways. In this way, the case selected (i.e., Huerta College) is intentional to gain new insight into a phenomena (i.e., policy implementation), make sense of why and how things occur (i.e., developing a race-conscious equity plan), and provide an in-depth analysis of processes and factors at play within their real-life contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). This approach draws from anthropology and sociology to craft an in-depth analysis of educational issues from a singular case within a bounded system (Levinson et al., 2009). A "bounded system" approach helps to fence in what will be studied by time, place, and activity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 39).

Case Study Site Context

Huerta College serves as an ideal site for an in-depth inquiry into policy implementation for multiple reasons. First, drawing on a larger project, I identified the campus as one of six community colleges in the state to use the SEP in race-conscious ways to address transfer in general, and more specifically Latinx transfer equity (Felix, 2020). Huerta was distinctive among the 112 colleges examined in that its equity plan used appropriated equity funds to create Latinx-conscious strategies to mitigate transfer inequity.

Second, Huerta College has unique institutional characteristics that can contribute to our understanding of policy implementation in community college. At the time of study, the campus enrolled more than 35,000⁴ students annually, of which nearly 80% were Latinx students. With such a high concentration of Latinx students, the school easily surpasses the 25% enrollment threshold to be identified as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI).⁵ Its HSI designation is also reflected in the senior administration and individuals involved with the implementation of the policy. Huerta College provides a worthwhile site to learn about strategies employed in support of the largest student population in the state's higher education system. Third, in contrast to the high number of Latinx students on campus, Huerta College has continuously struggled to improve the rates of transfer success for this population. The campus was identified as having extremely low transfer rates for Latinx students by UCLA's Civil Rights Project (Martinez-Wenzl & Marquez, 2012), which examined pathways to transfer for students of color. During the project period, the overall Huerta 6-year transfer rate was 24.9%, but for Latinx it was 19.9%. Data collected during the project highlight the stark disparities between the high Latinx enrollment and low rates of transfer success (Table 1).

Finally, given the size of the campus and the students served—students of color (94%), first-generation (76%), and low-income (72%)—Huerta College has been allocated a significant amount of student equity funds over the past four academic years. As a Top 10 recipient of equity funds, it is of interest to learn the ways these dollars are used to support students and address the equity gaps described. There is an abundance of research on the failures of policy-oriented

TABLE 1

Huerta College, Cohort Persistence by Race and Ethnicity

Cohort persistence	Cohort	Fall-to-fall persistence (%)	English completion (%)	Math completion (%)	Completion (%)	Transfer (%)
American Indian	88	47.7	19.3	18.2	11.4	4.5
Asian/Pacific Islander	2,625	69.1	42.6	57.5	24.5	14.2
Black	243	42.0	13.6	8.2	17.3	12.8
Latinx	12,756	56.2	21.7	19.0	7.8	4.3
Unknown	595	53.1	25.0	22.4	8.4	5.5
White	221	45.2	20.4	13.6	15.4	7.7
Total	16,528	57.7	25.0	25.0	10.8	6.1

reforms and the myriad ways individuals and institutions miss the mark in translating policy intent into impact. The selection of Huerta, as a site of opportunity, helps to learn more about race-conscious policy implementation and the factors that enabled practitioners to see the racial possibilities of reform and focus on addressing racial inequity (Dumas, 2014; Harper, 2015).

Data Collection Procedures

I collected data at Huerta over a 2-year period, enabling me to observe meetings, interview practitioners, and collect documents related to the implementation of their student equity plan. Given my focus on transfer and policy implementation, most of my interactions and observations were directly tied to those proposed activities unfolding into practices, including the *Viva La Mujer* Academy, Men of Color Support Program, *Raza* Transfer Partnerships, and the Latinx Transfer Equity Project. I conducted in-depth interviews with 16 campus leaders (see Table 2) involved with developing and enacting Huerta's student equity plan, observed more than 90 hours of meetings and events to see and hear how implementation unfolded, and reviewed archival documents related to student equity from 2014 to 2018. The richness of these data allows me to tell a deep and comprehensive story of the ways Huerta conceptualized and developed an equity plan that focused on improving Latinx transfer equity (Emerson et al., 2011).

Participants in this study are divided into two groups: planners and coordinators. The first group, *planners*, includes practitioners that proposed the goals and activities in the student equity plan. This

included individuals involved with the development of the initial student equity plan after the policy was passed in 2014. These individuals met as an informal group to examine campus data, identify specific student groups, and decide how to distribute resources to fund new and existing programs to improve equity. They contributed a historical perspective as to how the policy was perceived when it was initially introduced on campus, the messaging that accompanied implementation directions, and how they felt the campus would respond to an equity-minded reform. The second group, *coordinators*, were given the responsibility of carrying out the proposed activities and interventions in Huerta's student equity plan. The campus had to hire new or shift current practitioners' roles to initiate, run, and coordinate the programs envisioned in the plan. While these individuals may not have been involved with the development of the equity plan or proposed activities, they served as the primary personnel responsible for implementing the equity plan.

Analytic Strategies

In case study research, there is no standard approach or strategy to analyze data (Merriam, 2011). Data analysis began simultaneously with data collection, allowing me to conduct an iterative analysis of the data over time to identify emerging insights and themes, refine the collection process, and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the case (M. Patton, 2002). Once I completed my fieldwork, I proceeded to analyze my data in five phases, helping me to organize, interrogate, and present my data in ways that illuminated the factors that

TABLE 2

Campus Leaders Involved With Implementing Huerta's Student Equity Plan

Institutional actors	Gender	Ethnicity	CC transfer	Years at Huerta	Position
Planners					
Alejandra Gutierrez	F	Latinx		9	Faculty
Emilia Leon	F	Latinx		19	Dean
Lola Velazquez	F	Latinx	Yes	18	Counselor
Nancy Ortiz	F	Latinx	Yes	19	VP
Rey Valenzuela	M	Latinx	Yes	20	Faculty
Robert Harris	M	Black		4	Faculty
Santiago Perez	M	Latinx		7	Staff
Stacy Ramirez	F	Latinx		21	Staff
Coordinators					
Antonio Nava	M	Latinx	Yes	3	Staff
Elias Alonzo	M	Latinx	Yes	3	Counselor
Juanita Guzman	F	Latinx		3	Staff
Marissa Martinez	F	Latinx		10	Faculty
Román Hernandez	M	Latinx	Yes	New Hire	Counselor
Sandra Flores	F	Latinx	Yes	8	Staff
Tracey Rodriguez	F	Latinx	Yes	New Hire	Dean
Victor Magaña	M	Latinx	Yes	1	Staff

Note. Years spent on campus are counted as of the semester when data collection began.

shaped the implementation at Huerta. The phases included (a) Writing analytical reflections, (b) Reviewing and sorting data, (c) Asking analytic questions, (d) Theoretical coding, and (e) Identifying emergent categories.

As a qualitative researcher, I am drawn to the idea that analysis begins the first day of data collection (Luker, 2010). Emerson et al. (2011) share that the researcher is tasked with writing down in “regular, systematic ways what is observed and learned from the first day” they are embedded in the field (p. 31). Phase 1 began with writing memos during data collection that helped to capture the essence of what I was hearing, observing, and reading in the field (Emerson et al., 2011). In Phase 2, I reviewed and sorted those memos in three ways that help answer my research questions (Charmaz, 2009). I sorted chronologically, based on my theoretical framework and the type of data collected. I read my field notes sequentially to review what I had observed and understand the implementation of equity efforts over time.

Seeking to understand how Huerta developed a Latinx-focused equity plan, I turned to asking analytic questions (Neumann, 2006; Neumann & Pallas, 2015) during Phase 3. This analytical data

mining, where the researcher is able to extract data at different levels, helps to understand the conditions that shape implementation. Analytic questions are “questions that are asked of the data,” meant to extract usable chunks to formulate patterns based on that extraction (Neumann, 2006). Analytic questions allow the researcher to “search for direct responses to research questions,” while also “considering potentially relevant surrounding content” (Neumann & Pallas, 2015, p. 157). For example, I created a specific analytic question to guide the initial process: “What does this participant share about how they understood the requirement to develop an equity plan and what they could include in it?” (see Table 3 for all questions asked).

After extracting data via analytic questions, Phase 4 consisted of theoretically coding the subset of data to help identify patterns and emergent categories to present and describe as findings (Neumann & Pallas, 2015; Yanow, 2007). I utilized a two-stage approach whereby all 432 excerpts were reviewed and coded using the elements of my theoretical framework. I first coded with broader categories, such as “race-conscious interpretation,” “policy mandates as a shield,” or

TABLE 3

Analytic Question Posed

Research question	Analytic question
RQ1: Identifying Contextual Factors Shaping Plan Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does this participant [whose voice is represented in this transcript] share about how they understood the requirement to develop an equity plan and what they could include in it? • What does this participant share about the why Huerta was able to develop a Latinx-specific equity plan? • What does this participant share about their ability to advocate for Latinx-specific programs while being involved in the development of the plan?
RQ2: Identifying Contextual Factors Influencing Plan Implementation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does this participant [whose voice is represented in this transcript] share about the process to implement the Latinx-specific equity efforts at Huerta? • What does this participant share about the opportunities or challenges faced while implementing Latinx-specific equity efforts at Huerta? • How does this participant discuss/describe the progress and/or impact of these equity efforts on Latinx students?

“campus bureaucracy as barrier,” to take stock of what I had within the data (Charmaz, 2009) and how it shaped the zone of tolerance on campus (Oakes et al., 2005). After this process, the excerpts were organized into the four contextual factors. The theoretical elements related to the organizational context and individual characteristics had the most instances with 121 and 115 instances, respectively. In the final phase, I worked toward identifying patterns, descriptions, and events that highlighted how the student equity plan was developed and implemented on campus (Charmaz, 2009; Walcott, 2009). From these emergent categories, I initially settled on four themes of findings on plan development, which included “equity policy as a shield,” “what the implementer sees,” “assembling the necessary team,” and “the perfect storm.” Through the writing process, I fine-tuned the patterns that told the story of planning and implementation at Huerta. In doing so, the findings presented include more salient and accurate themes describing the factors that shaped practitioners’ ability to develop and implement their student equity plan to address Latinx transfer inequity.

Results

The results of this instrumental case study are described in two phases that cover how Huerta College first developed their plan and then moved forward with implementing the efforts within it. Three influential factors shaping the

planning process included a change in implementation leadership, bypassing traditional rules of selecting workgroup members, and a campus climate open to explicitly addressing Latinx transfer equity. The second phase highlights two factors that influenced the implementation of the equity plans: organizational bureaucracy and a shift in individuals responsible for carrying out the planning mandate.

Phase 1—Developing a Race-Conscious Student Equity Plan

Scholars have documented how the skill of the planner(s) overseeing the process influences the effectiveness of an educational plan in achieving its espoused goals. At Huerta College, the planning leader was Emilia Leon, described by many on campus as a “champion for equity” and someone that “cares deeply about issues facing women, students of color, and low-income students.” Emilia Leon described herself as a “Chicana activist” who grew up in the Huerta area and dedicated her life to educating her community. She was a 15-year faculty member before taking on the role Dean of Student Services and the responsibility for carrying out the student equity planning process.

Altering the Trajectory of Equity Planning. Emilia’s role as planning leader happened by chance rather than intention, when the Dean in charge of overseeing all planning processes on campus suddenly resigned. Initially, planning

TABLE 4

Comparing the Understanding of the Student Equity Policy at Huerta College

Comparison category	Campus leader overseeing the student equity planning process	
	James Denton	Emilia Leon
Service area	Institutional research	Student services
Understanding of initial purpose	To calculate inequity: “We looked at the instructions from the State for measuring equity, and we learned that the areas cover[ed] access, transfer, and completions.”	To address racial inequity: “To address racial inequality and social injustice that are occurring and how we can make changes.”
Requirements of the student equity	“Pulling lots of data, calculating equity gaps”	“Look at the data, develop charts, discuss a plan of action as a brainstorming group, figure out what could be some key initiatives we could trigger”
Reform as	The norm: “I was familiar with the process of getting people gathered to working to develop a plan. Again, we did equity before the equity plan; disproportionate impact studies that type of thing.”	New opening: “This is an opportunity—I can’t believe that the government is funding this, nobody wants to talk about equity. That’s what I was excited about.
Possibilities	“Initially I thought, there’s going to be an equity report due, and there is not much to it.”	“Infusion of excitement and enthusiasm of possibilities, but then when they started putting dollar amounts to it, I thought well, this is an opportunity to make things—not only change things but come alive, some of the ideas.”

responsibilities were assigned to James Denton, Dean of Institutional Research and Planning (IRP), as he also served as the Chair of the Strategic Planning Committee (SPC). The rules of shared governance required that any “planning initiative,” such as a facilities plan, technology plan, or educational master plan, would fall under the purview of the SPC.

Although the decision to have the IRP Dean oversee the student equity plan process was logical, it meant that the policy would be seen along the same line as routine planning efforts that sought to adequately predict classroom and administrative space needed or the technology capacity of the campus. After speaking with both James and Emilia, there were stark differences in how these two leaders saw the SEP and what each believed could be accomplished with it on campus. Table 4 outlines initial perceptions of the policy, understanding of what was required in the planning process, and beliefs about the level of influence the reform could have on campus to improve student equity.

Quite unexpectedly, a few weeks into the process, James Denton accepted a position elsewhere and left Huerta before appointing a full committee to complete the equity plan. James’s departure allowed Emilia’s ascension to lead the equity planning process, including the responsibility of selecting members of the planning workgroup. This shift in coordination was the first factor to shape the planning process toward a more race-conscious approach. Emilia’s understanding and vision of student equity set the tone moving forward. Being new to overseeing planning mandates, she brought a fresh perspective that relied less on traditional approaches to assembling planning members, the type of efforts to be proposed, or how funds could be allocated.

Emilia, a Latina faculty member-turned-administrator, grew up in the Huerta community and strongly identified with the history of Chicana activism, including the walkouts of 1968. These organized walkouts demanded better teachers, improved resources, and equal education, in

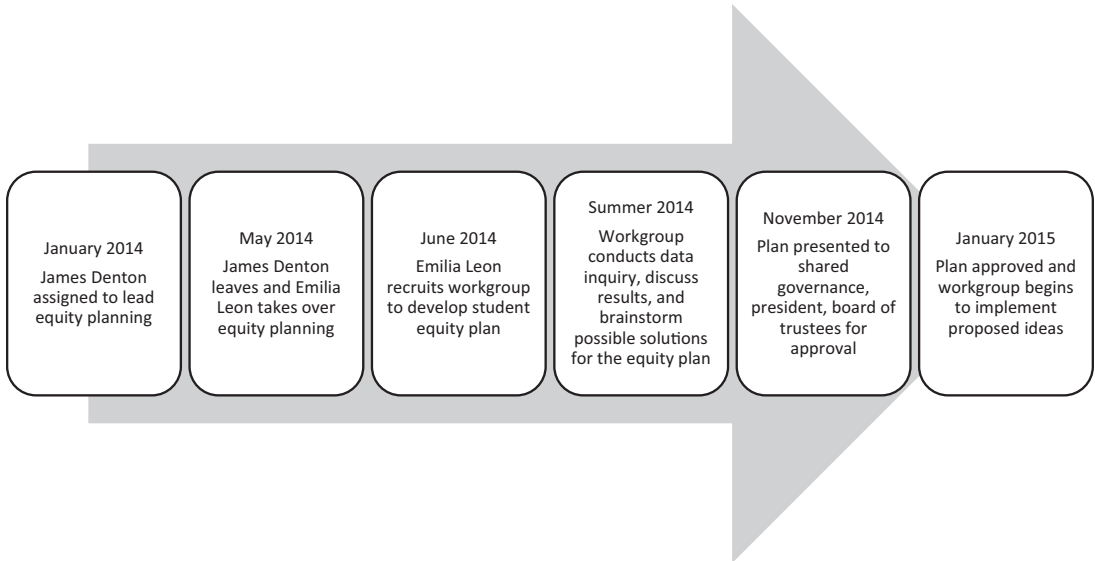


FIGURE 2. *Timeline of Huerta’s student equity planning process.*

particular for Chicanos, Mexican American, and students of Mexican descent in the Southwest. She possessed characteristics highlighted in my theoretical framework, including a willingness to implement the policy as an opportunity to address racial inequity and the equity-minded competence to use student equity as an action plan to tackle the barriers facing Latinx students in transfer. In contrast to James’s procedural perspective on the plan, Emilia immediately saw that the plan could make a difference for the campus community. For her, the student equity plan was a “new opportunity to transform the campus” and live up to its commitment to educational excellence for Latinx students who entered Huerta with transfer aspirations. In seeing that the student equity plan mandated the examination of racial inequity, she remembered thinking, “I can’t believe the state is funding this. Nobody wants to talk about equity. Nobody wants to talk about racial inequality and social injustice and how we can make changes. That’s what I was excited about.”

The Benefits of an Informal Planning Process. Given the recent enactment of the SEP, Huerta had no established process to complete the student equity plan and limited familiarity with the planning mandate. Whereas the college had created routines for other processes, such as accreditation and facilities planning, there were no existing

practices to complete the student equity plan. The compressed timeline (see Figure 2) for submitting the student equity plan to the Chancellor’s Office meant Emilia could circumvent traditional campus governance rules. I highlight two specific areas that played a role in advancing a more race-conscious student equity plan at Huerta: first, the opportunity to operate as an “ad hoc workgroup” to complete the plan, and second, the flexibility to intentionally recruit members to the workgroup who shared Emilia’s vision for student equity.

Creating an informal implementation workgroup. When Emilia took over from James Denton, the purview of the student equity planning process also changed. If James had stayed, the planning process would have been coordinated by the Strategic Planning Council. When Emilia took over, it became an ad hoc workgroup housed in student services. Rey Valenzuela, a former Huerta transfer student and now a long-time professor in the Social Sciences, participated in the planning workgroup and shared that “committee” had a formal definition and role within the campus, and that as a workgroup there would be more flexibility to meet more often during the summer and get the plan done within a small group before sharing out with decision-making bodies at Huerta.

The workgroup⁶ was created and operated outside the typical structure established by shared

governance rules.⁷ For example, a long-standing process required by the union contract was committee appointments that are representative of formal stakeholder groups such as employee-type (e.g., classified staff), specific academic departments (e.g., math, liberal arts), and functional area (e.g., student services, workforce development). Speaking with two planners, these rules of representative membership in formal committees were described as the “Noah’s Ark” approach where the priority was to have two people from different sectors of the campus serving on decision-making bodies. At Huerta, this usually resulted in committees being filled randomly with two faculty union representatives, two counselors, two classified staff, and so on. In Emilia’s experience, “implementation becomes difficult” when the people involved are “representing their area” rather than “what’s best for the campus or students” and ultimately, she felt that “very little change occurred.” The newness of the planning process on campus allowed for a different type of workgroup to be established, one where the selection of members was driven by competencies around equity rather than constituency represented.

Building the planning team: A group of Latinx, transfer-focused practitioners. Huerta, like other campuses in the state, had the discretion to determine what “broad campus and community participation” meant (CA Education Code §54220). At Huerta, Emilia Leon filled a roster of members that aligned with her vision to use the plan as a means to address racial disparities in transfer and completion. Emilia prioritized individual interest and expertise in equity rather than equal campus representation. Rather than leaving things to chance or having the workgroup filled at random, Emilia engaged in behind-the-scenes recruiting; she shared, “I called people and said, I need you to volunteer because shared governance is putting out the announcement to join [the workgroup], I really needed people who were committed to equity.” The workgroup was comprised primarily of racially minoritized campus leaders who cared deeply about student success, issues of equity, and improving transfer at Huerta. Of the eight committee members interviewed, seven identified as Latinx⁸ and one as Black. Additional characteristics of the planning workgroup members are noted in Table 2.

The approach to including planners based on competencies rather than constituency was critical to the development phase. The planning team consisted of key people who were aware of issues of equity and racial disparities and had expertise in program development, as well as individuals that possessed social status at Huerta College that could help push the plan forward. Emilia described the specific characteristics of the planning workgroup:

First, these [practitioners] have a strong work ethic. Second, they are ready for a challenge and are very fluid in terms of working with something new. And the biggest thing is how they view students. They are viewing students as an asset here on campus, not talking about what students can’t do. We had a collective vision that we’re here to help students find their self-agency, and could use the [plan] to be much more organized and efficient with our services to help them be successful.

Once the team was formed, the planning workgroup met between June and December 2014 to develop, complete, and get the student equity plan approved. I was able to interview 8 of the 12 members. At the time of data collection, four members had left the campus and were unreachable. One individual, Bianca Morales, still worked at Huerta but declined to participate. Within the equity planning group, the most vocal actors in the development process were those advocating for Latinx transfer equity. Compared with the full workgroup, I identified these individuals as “transfer equity entrepreneurs”: planners who pushed conversations on transfer, proposed specific strategies to include in the plan that focused on improving opportunities to transfer from Huerta to 4-year institutions, and persistently advocated for these equity resources to be used in transfer areas (Kingdon, 2014). As one transfer equity entrepreneur shared, “Well, put us in a room, with that data, and that amount of money, what did you expect us to do?” Being in charge of the student equity planning gave these transfer equity entrepreneurs the opportunity to discuss and propose race-specific, culturally relevant transfer efforts to combat the low rates of transfer on campus.

Convergence Toward Addressing Latinx Transfer Equity. The next critical step in the planning process was conducting campus-based inquiry

into five academic indicators (access, basic skills progression, course completion, degree completion, and transfer success) for specific student groups (e.g., students of color, women, foster youth, veterans) outlined in the policy. The race-based disaggregation of data helped unveil (un)known inequity for specific student groups on campus. For some of the planning workgroup members, these numbers were startling; it was the first time they were exposed to disaggregated data. One participant shared, “For me, the data were eye-opening, because I was new, I was new to my role and the whole community college world. It was an eye-opening experience to see the numbers.” For others, the data and equity gaps identified through this process were already known, but now they had clear evidence that Latinx and other students of color needed more support in transfer to be successful on campus. Lola shared,

I always knew that’s who needed the most help. We are a Hispanic-Serving Institution, the majority of our students are Latino and Latinos are the ones that are struggling the most. I mean it is ridiculous to not acknowledge those facts.

As the workgroup pored over data charts, tables, and reports, they gained confidence that the evidence pointed toward supporting Latinx students, especially in transfer. The disaggregated data made it clear that transfer was an issue for all students, but Latinx students took the longest of all racial groups, nearly 7 years, to transfer. Additional data disaggregated by gender revealed that Latinas had the longest completion time, more than 8.5 years. Planning documents shared by Nancy had circled and highlighted the section of the chart displaying that of the 584 Latinas in the cohort of 1,392 analyzed, 42% (248) of Latinas took more than 10 years to successfully transfer. Nancy argued that “having race-based data” made these transfer inequities “so evident” and much more “glaring,” as if they were “screaming at you” to address them.

The disaggregation of data helped practitioners to allocate funds to create specific programs to support Latinx, first-generation, and undocumented students (Table 5).

Nancy and Lola pitched *Viva La Mujer*, as “a program just for Latina women” and grounded in “the data because we identified the gap. Latina

TABLE 5

Breakdown of Student Equity Funding, Transfer Efforts

Equity activity	Amount ^a
<i>Viva La Mujer</i> transfer program	US\$160,000
Men of color transfer program	US\$180,000
University transfer partnership	US\$450,000
Latinx transfer equity project	US\$450,000
Faculty advocate program	US\$110,000
Subtotal allocated	US\$1,350,000
Total allocated	US\$3,000,000

^aFunds rounded in an attempt to provide anonymity.

women were finishing in ten years or stopping out.” Lola reflected, “Once we proposed the idea, that really got the ball rolling, people in the room were all for it, they became part of the movement” to address the barriers facing Latinas in transfer. Nancy added, “The program was focused on improving transfer rates for Latinas and providing wrap-around services that scaffold” as well as “getting them through developmental courses that were holding them back.” Nancy recollected, “with everyone on board, our juices were going, trying to do more specific things for Latinas like offering daycare services.” She added, “We explored lots of ways to better support the students that needed additional help to transfer out. Glad this one was included.”

By August 2014, the workgroup began to share out the equity plan with broader campus stakeholders. Alejandra Gutierrez recalls going to a governance meeting to share the first full version of the plan and getting pushback from some members that were hesitant about the Latinx-specific activities included “We presented it at academic senate, and somebody said, ‘this sounds exclusionary, are we going to exclude all our other students, but Hispanics? What if somebody Asian comes in and wants to join the programs you’ve proposed?’” Similarly, Nancy talked about countering comments around the amount of funding being used for programs like *Viva La Mujer*: “People questioned the resources that went into the programs. But when you see that this is where there is a gap, and this is where there is a need, then, yeah, your resources should go there.” She continued, “Some on campus may

completely disagree, but that's where it's really important to have a strong team that shares your goals and philosophy." Rey Valenzuela, a long-time faculty member who served on the shared governance council, said that the planning group was not targeting Latinx students capriciously, but responding to the needs that emerged from the data that they were required to include in the plan.

Ultimately, what I found was that the policy's mandate and planning process offered opportunities to talk about racial equity gaps, understand why these racial disparities occurred, and propose efforts to specifically address them on campus. One implementer described how the policy was used as a "shield" whenever potential resistors or impediments had risen, combining the mandate's explicit language as well as data showing Latinx students faced the greatest inequity in transfer to pursue a course of action that had been impossible in previous years. Lola added that

for the first time, we had the green light to be Latino-centric, we had the license to do it. The plan asked us to close the equity gaps, that's what we needed to do . . . it was now okay to over-resource certain groups in order for them to be successful.

Others shared similar understandings that while they had traditionally been told to avoid practices that singled-out specific racial groups, the new plan "equipped" and "authorized" the workgroup to follow up on hunches that Latinx students faced the greatest disparities on campus and needed additional support. Nancy Ortiz shared,

the equity policy [was] saying you must serve these groups. So, [we] came out and said these [equity] programs are for these groups; this is what the state is telling [us], this is what the data says. So, let's target them.

The mandates included in the planning process created a window for race-conscious plan development, and when questioned about their approach, these campus leaders were able to use the policy as a legislative lever to get their plan and proposed ideas approved for enactment.

After a summer of plan development, Emilia and Santiago presented the equity plan to the SPC and then the campus shared governance

committee in November. Emilia noted that this internal review yielded minimal revisions. The workgroup prepared next for the district review, the last step before submission to the state. At this meeting, an updated equity plan and one-page executive summary with five supplementary tables on "disproportionate impacts and plans for improvement" were presented. Santiago did not "remember it as a difficult vetting process," adding, "Our presentation to the board of trustees was only like three slides, four slides, and so we probably had about five minutes to present, right. So, that was it." He concluded,

We didn't even review all the indicators, just some of them. And what they really cared about was the budget piece, now that I am looking at it [pulled up notes on his computer screen], they only cared that what we proposed aligned with the money we spent.

Approved at the board meeting, Huerta's equity plan was submitted to the Chancellor's Office; now the campus could move forward with their plan and put the workgroup's ideas into practice.

Phase 2—Implementing the Vision of Student Equity

As Huerta practitioners moved to implement the student equity plan, they began to experience a different set of conditions, obstacles, and challenges than in the planning phase. The implementation of Huerta's Latinx-focused equity plan was shaped by two aspects: (a) unanticipated organizational roadblocks that undermined fidelity to the plan and (b) a drastic shift between the individuals who led the planning process and those responsible for implementing the equity efforts.

Organizational Bureaucracy: Accessing Equity Funds and Delays in Hiring Personnel. The first set of roadblocks involved practitioners' inability to access and spend the funds allocated to establish these new equity efforts. Alejandra Gutierrez was selected as the campus-wide coordinator for student equity, and her appointment marked the formal transition between the planning phase and start of implementation. The position oversaw the campus-wide implementation of the proposed equity projects, which

included identifying practitioners to oversee individual efforts, making sure equity resources were being used appropriately, and communicating progress with campus stakeholders. Alejandra, a Latina professor in the Chicano Studies department, was handpicked by Emilia Leon to be the coordinator. Alejandra taught at Huerta since 2007 and shared that “teaching Chicano Studies here was my dream job,” but “now this position gives me the chance to make a difference for students across the campus.”

With Huerta’s equity plan approved, Emilia and Alejandra were ready to hire personnel, pay for programming costs, and acquire materials or supplies necessary for each program, but Huerta’s fiscal office required budget requisitions for each new position and purchase. From the start, Alejandra shared the trouble she faced as coordinator trying to get the equity programs off the ground. She commented, “It was frustrating, we couldn’t spend the money, we couldn’t get anything really in place. I never had real control over the budget, how was I supposed to oversee these projects?” Emilia described this process as “trying to unlock the money” and having several conversations to “convince people on campus how to use the money [they] had already decided how to spend.” Although the plan was approved and allocated monies for each equity project, to actually spend the funds, they needed to submit additional requests through a three-stage review that included the shared governance budget committee, the Vice President of Finance, and district budget office.

These added layers of bureaucracy delayed implementation and took time away from developing the planned programs. Alejandra lamented, “Just because they were approved in the equity plan didn’t mean that they were approved by our VP [of Finance] or the district budget office.” For example, Emilia Leon discussed the lengths it took to get requests approved for student equity projects. She shared, first you “draft[ed] the job posting, making sure to include all the details of the position and how they would support the campus’s equity efforts.” Then it would need to be approved internally by “budget committee of Shared Governance, then VP of Finance and finally campus president.” From there the posting was submitted for review to the

district budget office to make sure funds were available for hire. At the district level, a budget analyst reviewed the posting, a process which varied between 3 days and a month depending on the number of job requests submitted to the central office at that time. Emilia mentioned that she would personally go from the fiscal office to the district office and back to the president to get the signatures in one day and avoid delays.

Emilia recalled her frustration with the requisition process to get these programs up and ready: “So our plan is approved, we have all this work to do, and we haven’t got our funds approved, no staff onboard yet.” She continued, “We were really stymied during this time, we’re building this process, trying to figure out how to move forward” but challenged with “getting the capacity built for these programs” and doing “time-consuming work” that was necessary before the efforts could help Latinx students transfer. Emilia shared, “We have our money to pay for them. But they don’t want to fund it because it commits the position. So that’s why we’re behind with hiring.” She felt the initial implementation process was like “squirrels, getting all these nuts collected, but couldn’t crack them open.”

A visible consequence of the cumbersome requisition process and hesitancy to approve equity expenditures was the decision to abandon plans for hiring new full-time coordinators and instead to recruit current staff. Initially, Alejandra intended for new, dedicated positions to direct each project, but she soon realized that the process to approve and hire new staff took at least 6 to 8 months, from drafting the job description to onboarding new hires. Administrative procedures and organizational rules made it almost impossible to bring on new personnel dedicated to the equity initiatives; Emilia and Alejandra decided to staff from within campus. Emilia reflected on the hiring process and influence on getting these programs started: “How can you develop strategies and really realize them without having the adequate staff or the appropriate stuff to carry them out? So, the implementation became difficult.” As a tradeoff, Huerta was able to fill-in coordinating roles quickly (a few weeks rather than 6 months), but with current staff who had a limited capacity to serve in these roles. Practitioners at Huerta may have had

well-intentioned ideas, strategies, and programs to make a difference for Latinx students, but bureaucratic barriers and limited organizational infrastructure restricted and delayed the implementation process.

Shifting the Responsibility of Student Equity. Soon after the plan was approved, campus leaders intimately aware of the conversations on student equity, familiar with the data inquiry, and involved with the summer-long planning process began to step away from the implementation workgroup. Some left for new career opportunities outside of the campus, and others were promoted within Huerta to senior administration positions, removing them from day-to-day interactions with the student equity projects. Prominent individuals in the planning process, such as Emilia, Nancy, Lola, and Rey, who had advocated for the Latinx transfer focus, moved on to new responsibilities. The key actors in the planning process were in new positions with new responsibilities that limited their role in the implementation of the ideas they developed just a few months earlier. Nancy reflected on this transition, “I wasn’t involved with equity anymore, but there was some overlap, we were working together on a comprehensive strategy, leveraging our resources through [multiple] state efforts.” For others in the planning workgroup, rather than a departure or promotion, there was a perception that once the plan was written and approved, their role was over. Santiago Perez illustrated this point, commenting “people were identified to help implement the plan, but I don’t remember how. But for that part, my job was done.”

Disconnect between planning and implementation. There were critical differences between the individuals involved with the planning and enactment process: the members’ social status on campus, level of equity-minded competence, and contextual knowledge related to student equity. The members of the planning workgroup had longevity and social status on campus: Practitioners were senior administrators, representatives from the faculty union and shared governance, and experts in transfer-related issues. The implementation process, however, involved individuals selected for their ability to coordinate a program

and carry out its day-to-day operations, rather than the capacity to develop and push through big ideas to address student equity. The coordinators included in Table 2 had fewer years on campus, did not hold senior-level positions, and were tasked with leading individual projects, which caused them to pay attention to the discrete components for their program without accounting for the original, more comprehensive, vision of the plan. Because the staff members recruited to carry out the activities in the student equity plan had not participated in the deeper data-based discussion that drove the content of the plan, they were less knowledgeable about the student equity plan policy, the planning process, or the impetus for these Latinx transfer projects. This difference in knowledge came through during the interviewing process, as three participants involved with implementation used old notes and printed handouts to discuss student equity and their role assigned when I spoke with them. In contrast, those involved with the planning process were able to provide an account of their participation without supplemental notes or materials. In addition, individual project coordinators had a more siloed approach to student equity, focused solely on their program rather than seeing a comprehensive strategy for addressing Latinx transfer issues on campus. The enactment of the equity plan began without the participation of the individuals who conceived the programs, creating a knowledge, leadership, and experiential vacuum.

“We failed, we learned”: *Delays and progress on implementation.* The task before new coordinators was to translate and expand the limited details in the equity plan; moving forward, they faced a sharp learning curve with limited time to get up to speed. Marissa Martinez, an adjunct faculty in the social sciences who oversaw *Viva La Mujer*, described her perspective on this transition: “Although the background and scope of the project were shared, spearheading the project wasn’t easy, trying to achieve what [Lola and Emilia] wanted to see with the program took time, some failure, and getting more help.” Antonio Nava, working in student activities and the new coordinator for the Men of Color transfer program, shared, “I felt it was a rocky start, it wasn’t until I started working developing the

transfer program that I learned about the goals, vocabulary, and mindset for equity.” He continued, “It definitely was an on the job learning process, trying to get this program off the ground.”

The coordinators described the early implementation period as the “pilot phase,” where they experimented with what these programs could look like and started over if things did not work out. Antonio Nava expanded, “It was a lot of reflection, going back to the drawing board, and sharing out ideas, saying this is not going to work or this is what’s going to work.” He continued, “We failed, we learned, we were pretty much piloting during the first year, but that’s the foundation for what we currently have.” Although there were several obstacles in the early implementation period, practitioners were able to learn from mistakes, make progress, and address some of the shortcomings that constrained implementation. In particular, programs were given more support staffing and resources as equity funds were renewed and the funding became stable; communication improved across equity programs, which lessened the siloed implementation approach; and more attention was placed on evaluation, to understand the progress each program was making toward improving Latinx transfer equity.

When asked to reflect on the early implementation period, Juanita Guzman shared, “The transfer efforts are amazing on paper, but results aren’t . . . We’ve had lots of challenges with equity programs, sustaining them, trying to make them larger, incorporating them into the fabric of the campus.” She continued, “One of the biggest obstacles was there was no clear designation of who was leading the efforts, you had people with .4 or .6 [percent] of their time committed,” and “without 100% focus, things fall through the cracks, it’s tough, nobody feels responsibility if they are only doing this part-time on campus.” These early implementation challenges faced by coordinators also plagued Alejandra Gutierrez, the Student Equity Faculty Coordinator, overseeing the development of these efforts across the campus. Alejandra left the position after several bad experiences trying to lead the implementation of the student equity efforts on campus. She shared that she “struggled in the position,” had “difficulty convening meetings,” working with an informal group, and wanted to move the

workgroup into a formal committee “to try to gain legitimacy with the academic senate.” As described earlier, the pushback from the VP of Finance and the fiscal office also made it a difficult experience to manage. She shared, “Getting them to pay for the equity stuff was like pulling teeth. There was money for it. We were just always struggling to get money on time to make these things work.”

Implementing the student equity plan required that it conform to procedures and rules that had been in place at Huerta long before student equity was introduced. Consequently, Huerta’s entrenched bureaucracy and the inexperience and lower status of the individuals charged with implementation undermined the transformational vision for Latinx transfer equity. The experiences at Huerta showcased the slow and complex process of implementing equity-oriented policy reform. The individuals involved with establishing equity programs to serve Latinx students seeking to transfer needed time to troubleshoot organizational capacity issues and delays in accessing equity funds while also serving in part-time coordination roles. The lack of early coordination also highlighted the decentralized approach to implementation, which contrasted with the tight-knit workgroup that developed the equity plan.

Discussion and Implications

In this study, I used a multicontextual theoretical framework to explore the processes that shape educational planning efforts and their subsequent implementation in community college. The results from Huerta illustrate the opportunities, as well as the challenges, to crafting a visionary document for improved institutional and student outcomes and the difficult road to enact that vision. In the planning phase, I highlighted the critical aspects that shaped a convergence toward Latinx transfer equity: Emilia’s accession to lead the planning effort, the composition and characteristics of the equity plan workgroup, and the ways the actors collectively used the policy’s mandates to be Latinx-specific in their approach to developing their plan. During implementation, my results showcased how unanticipated organizational roadblocks, burdensome administrative procedures, and a drastic

transition between those that wrote the plan and those coordinating it impeded plan enactment. The story of Huerta is of a plan that was crafted in race-conscious ways to address Latinx transfer inequity but came up against a shortage of experienced leaders, entrenched campus practices, and limited organizational capacity during implementation. Santiago Perez distinguished the differences between designing the equity plan and implementing it: “We were definitely optimistic, we believed that the [equity efforts] could reduce gaps, could reduce the time to transfer for Hispanic students.” He continued, “There was energy in the planning group that we’re going to be able to do this. But implementation was a whole different animal.”

Comparing the conditions during the planning and implementation phases, Huerta College had two different zones of tolerance; whereas the planning phase experienced a more open-environment for race-conscious efforts, the implementation phase experienced a constricted environment. The initial phase could be likened to practitioners flying 10,000 feet above the campus with seasoned pilots charting the trajectory and destination of student equity. Above the clouds, the development of the equity plan was guided by experienced leaders at Huerta, shaped by a small core of Latinx transfer advocates, and faced minimal resistance when moving the Latinx-focused projects through the review and approval process. Table 6 organizes the findings corresponding to the conceptual framework and highlights ways practitioners at Huerta were enabled or hindered during the planning and implementation of student equity.

When it came to implementing the equity plan, the destination was the same, but a different journey altogether. During implementation, practitioners overseeing the process traveled by car to try to reach the destination, having to face more on-the-ground obstacles, unanticipated challenges, and organizational roadblocks to reach the planned destination. As newcomers to the student equity plan and the projects focused on Latinx students, these coordinators were less aware of the conversations and data analysis that took place during the planning process, particularly how the emphasis on Latinx students came to be, and for the most part, only knew about the individual programs they would oversee. Lacking

foundational context limited their ability to implement the reforms and advocate for remedying Latinx transfer inequity as a priority. The window for race-conscious implementation decreased between approving the equity ideas on paper and the process of turning them into reality on campus.

This study contributes to educational planning, policy implementation research and the ways community colleges use equity-oriented reform to address and mitigate inequitable student outcomes on campus (Bensimon & Dowd, 2009; McLaughlin, 1987; Nienhusser, 2018; Soliz, 2018). Much of what has been studied examines finalized plans submitted to local, state, or federal educational agencies (Ching et al., 2018; Redding & Searby, 2020; Strunk et al., 2016); that is, focus is typically placed on planning as a product, with less known about the nuanced process of crafting a plan. This study took a deep dive into the planning process and highlights the importance of planning leaders, the skills, knowledge, and commitments they possess, the role of disaggregated data, and the back-and-forth discussion about who and what should be prioritized in a plan. Like many studies examining what influences planning, I find that the design of the planning mandate, skill of planners, and school’s climate for change are critical to developing an effective educational plan. The results from this study show the importance of designing a planning mandate with non-neutral language (Oakes et al., 2005), including elements that can empower implementers to be race-conscious in their approach (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015), and allowing flexibility at the local level (Hill, 2001; Lenhoff & Ulmer, 2016). The equity-oriented language in the SEP cued planners at Huerta that this reform was about supporting students who faced the largest barriers in student success. Campus implementers described that the student equity plan finally offered the opportunity to pursue endeavors that sought parity in outcomes for racial groups on campus.

At the same time, results from this work build on the documented struggles (Kezar, 2014; Lewis & Diamond, 2016; Oakes & Lipton, 2002) to enact planned institutional change, especially change seeking to improve parity across historical marginalized groups. Strunk et al. (2016) discuss how “ease of plan implementation” is

TABLE 6

Contextual Factors as Catalysts and Barriers to Equity-Oriented Policy Implementation

Factor	Planning phase	Implementing phase
Individual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong, high-status leaders • Social justice focus with an understanding of student equity • Prior knowledge and experiences with campus reforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practitioners in less influential positions on campus • Lack of contextual knowledge of student equity
Organizational	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Senior leadership prioritized improving transfer • Increased awareness of racial disparities and how to address them • Institution committed to supporting Latinx student success 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement plan in a part-time role • Campus bureaucracy and entrenched practices delay access to equity funds • Lack of infrastructure on campus to support the implementation
Situated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic recruitment of planners allows for cohesive intragroup dynamics • Summer planning process allows for collective sensemaking • Use agency to advocate for campus change related to Latinx transfer (collective action) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hastily selected individuals to coordinate equity projects • No organized space for practitioners to come together and develop a shared understanding • Focus on implementing an individual project (siloed action)
Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A new initiative on campus overseen by an informal ad hoc workgroup • Mandates prompt the exploration of inequity in outcomes by race 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiative gets embedded into campus structure becoming a shared governance subcommittee • Revised mandates prompt equity for all approach
Zone of Tolerance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextual factors aligned to create an environment that was open to race-conscious planning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextual factors acted as barriers to create an environment that limited the ability to enact race-conscious projects

shaped by the level of autonomy that leaders have to carry out efforts as well as school's climate for change (p. 297). At Huerta, coordinators' attempts to enact the equity plan were severely limited by not having discretion over allocated funds. The need to go through traditional resource allocation routines delayed implementation and the ability for individuals to fulfill the ideas in the plan. Similarly, existing scholarship describes how "unforeseen barriers" can restrict enactment such as unanticipated changes in staffing or lack of buy-in from campus members who were not part of the plan writing (Ching et al., 2018; Redding & Searby, 2020). The implementation phase at Huerta included both of these barriers hindering fidelity to the transformative vision of the equity plan.

Finally, not everything was derailed during implementation, but much of the plan needed to

be modified to move Huerta's race-conscious equity efforts forward. Huerta's leaders and practitioners learned from their mistakes and were able to remediate their implementation approach to accomplish the goals of strengthening transfer for Latinas and for men of color. Kezar (2014) reminds us that planning for change is easier compared with enacting proposed change; it is one thing for institutional leaders to come up with ideas, it is another to have to traverse the "swamps, deserts, and chasms of implementation" (p. 224). Early failure is learning, which helps leaders to understand impediments to change and what additional attention is necessary beyond what was articulated in a plan. The case study of Huerta also shows that it is possible for an institution to self-correct: to learn from early setbacks and adapt their approach to accomplish their goals of mitigating barriers to student equity.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The results of this study have broad implications for policymakers, institutions, and practitioners seeking to use planning mandates to address current and historical inequities for racially minoritized students. I discuss three specific implications to improve the use of planning mandates in higher education, the ability to craft plan to address educational inequity, and ways to navigate the complexity of implementing equity-oriented plans.

Race-Conscious Design Elements. If the SEP, and similar planning mandates, is expected to bring about institutional change, policymakers must reconsider the design elements within these reforms. What is unique about this study is the emphasis on using planning to address racial inequities. The plan at Huerta was driven by racially disaggregated data, personnel open to discussing racialized disparities, and a campus open to race-specific strategies. To expand race-conscious approaches to planning mandates, the Chancellor's Office must take stock of the level and depth of change required to implement the SEP, particularly helping campus planners understanding ambiguous concepts such as "equity" and "racial disparities." Aligned with L. D. Patton et al. (2015), I suggest adopting capacity-building tools such as professional development workshops and trainings that focus on the realities of race, systemic causes of inequities, and ways well-intended policies at times are detrimental to students of color in higher education. As the authors note, regardless of student equity efforts, if oppressive structures are not acknowledged, racial equity will not be achieved. With an investment in capacity-building, institutions and practitioners can have a deeper awareness of issues of equity and race and use policy efforts to support the success of racially minoritized students.

Selecting for Equity-Mindedness and Experience. The results of this work call for the intentional selection of individuals that can interpret and implement planning mandates in ways that benefit racially minoritized students facing equity gaps, such as Latinx students in transfer. Once in charge of equity planning, Emilia intentionally selected "like-minded, equity-oriented"

practitioners that made a difference in how the equity plan was developed. In turn, the planning workgroup displayed characteristics of equity-mindedness, as defined by Bensimon (2007), specifically being race-conscious, recognizing the responsibility of institutions to address inequity, and need for the redistribution of resources to the neediest student groups (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). Implementing complex reforms within institutions of higher education requires practitioners that have a certain set of skills, competencies, and experiences on campus. Here then I argue for institutions to actively seek and identify reform leaders who are more equity-oriented, are comfortable discussing race and racial disparities, possess the ability to develop race-specific strategies, and are able to advocate for these efforts when getting the plan approved on campus. Through an understanding of equity and the causes of racial inequity, practitioners may be able to see racial possibilities in reform efforts and strive toward racial equity in community colleges (Harper et al., 2009).

Awareness of Implementation Processes. Finally, it is necessary for planners to have a better understanding of the complexity of implementation and challenges to institutional change. Although the proposed initiatives in the equity plan looked like great opportunities to improve how Huerta supported Latinx students in transferring, the plan lacked an awareness of campus dynamics. Planners failed to consider that they were introducing new strategies into preexisting campus infrastructure, entrenched practices, and bureaucratic organizational routines that would constrain the implementation process. Implementers at Huerta were unable to anticipate challenges, lacking an "analysis of the organization, its readiness for change, and how an initiative fits" or can be sustained with the current campus context (Kezar, 2014, p. xiv). To implement equity plans with fidelity, campus leaders must have a firm understanding of their campus culture before engaging in change, to assess how the newly introduced ideas will integrate or contend with the existing campus conditions (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). An assessment of an institution's readiness for change is key to avoid unforeseen challenges and prepare for potential roadblocks during implementation.

Conclusion

Using an instrumental case study approach allowed me to observe the flow of policy in a community college and the cycle of the enactment. Rather than a snapshot of the implementation process, I described how key contextual factors shaped how student equity was envisioned and enacted on campus. Huerta's plan stood out from the others because it embodied characteristics of equity-mindedness: it was race-conscious, positioned equity as the responsibility of the institution, and included more culturally relevant projects. Yet much of the envisioned plan was delayed in the implementation process. Documenting the experiences at Huerta expands our knowledge of the way implementation unfolds in higher education and how contextual factors shape the ability of practitioners to improve equity through planning mandates. To be able to achieve the possibilities of equity-oriented reforms, institutions and individual implementers must be able to interpret policy changes as transformative, build a coalition of actors on campus to carry the work forward, and account for potential barriers that lie ahead in the attempt to improve racial equity.

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Notes

1. Huerta College and all participant names are pseudonyms
2. All data are rounded to also protect anonymity.
3. These five areas of inquiry were the indicators which were required during the time of the study. Since 2019, there are slight shifts in the areas to be examined under student equity.
4. Numbers are rounded to try to protect anonymity.
5. Which entitles the institution to apply and access federal Title 5 grants.
6. Given the informal nature of the planning team, I describe this decision-making body as the "planning workgroup." Later on, in the fall of 2016, the workgroup became the Student Equity Advisory Committee, a formal subcommittee of the Shared Governance Council.
7. An implementation progress report by the Legislative Analyst Office in 2016 showed that community colleges had an array of configurations to develop an equity plan from advisory groups, informal working groups, ad hoc subcommittee, or folded into existing planning-related committees in the shared governance structure.
8. Four of the seven identified as Mexican American and/or Chicana/o, but I use the umbrella term Latinx.

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