

A MOVEMENT TOWARDS EQUITY:

**Tracing the Impact of the
Center for Urban Education's
Student Equity Planning Institute (SEPI)**

**By Eric R. Felix, Leticia Bustillos,
and Estela Mara Bensimon**



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Executive Summary

Background

CALIFORNIA'S EQUITY POLICIES: Serving more than 2.3 million students across 115 institutions, California Community Colleges are the cornerstone of the state's higher education system. They have made a commitment to provide their students opportunities to obtain not just a credential or degree, but the skills that lead to economic mobility. In order to deliver on this, they've collectively instituted *Vision for Success*, which calls for reducing equity gaps by 40 percent. This initiative is also supported by AB 1809, state legislation that aims to empower campus leaders to move beyond rhetoric of closing outcome gaps, through the Student Equity and Achievement Program and by taking meaningful action to correct unconscious biases and institutional actions that further marginalize racially minoritized students.

INTRODUCING THE STUDENT EQUITY PLANNING INSTITUTE (SEPI): In order to receive funds from the program established by AB 1809, each community college must create and maintain a Student Equity Plan that explicitly addresses racial disparities students face. To support the creation of these plans, the Center for Urban Education (CUE) hosted more than 260 community college administrators, faculty, and staff at SEPI in the spring of 2019. CUE provided resources and tools to help attendees develop effective Student Equity Plans that go beyond compliance and toward transformation. SEPI also created time and space for insightful discussions that went beyond examining racial disparities—exploring race, racism, and the root causes of racial inequities in California's community colleges.

MEASURING A MOVEMENT: SEPI had a measurable, noteworthy impact on attendees, who left with a deepened personal sense of responsibility for supporting racially minoritized students and advancing equity on their campuses. To better understand the changes sparked by SEPI, CUE worked with four campuses to continue conversations about their work in prioritizing equity.

Overview of Our Approach

Between July and December 2019, we partnered with faculty and administrators from Cuesta College, Fresno City College, Mission College, and Norco College to conduct interviews and site visits to document the ways they applied tools, skills, and resources from SEPI.

These conversations allowed us to learn more about how they applied what they learned at SEPI, their experience implementing racial equity efforts, and the reception of (and potential pushback to) implementing race-conscious efforts on campuses. This report documents the experiences of 18 of the 38 administrators and faculty members interviewed after their SEPI sessions.

Participant Reflections

Our interviews with administrators and faculty members resulted in critical learnings we've highlighted below, with key quotes and reflections from administrators and faculty.

Participants expressed a deep-rooted commitment to supporting racially minoritized students and a clear understanding of the importance of equity, which was enhanced by the tangible tools and examples shared at SEPI.

SEPI provided the “springboard” for future conversations they would engage in once they “get back [to] work and study [racial inequities] further.”

“We were already formulating a plan ... we’re changing this language [and] we’re changing these narratives to make them more race-conscious.”

“The most important thing I learned out of [SEPI] is that we can’t be afraid to talk about race. If we’re afraid to talk about race, then we’re perpetuating it and leaving students out.”

Approaching their Student Equity Plans with equity-mindedness led participants to a deeper understanding why this work matters in the context of today’s community college students, and a sense of personal responsibility for change.

“The institute and the [equity] imperative that [was] modeled for us was just so empowering. It gave us a lot of courage.”

“These students are here now, and this is my job; if I can do anything to mitigate the circumstances that they’re in, [then] it’s my moral obligation [to act].”

“I’m committing to do it better and to be brave and to speak up ... if we don’t demonstrate equity across disciplines and departments, how are we supposed to have conversations about racial equity for our students?”

While COVID-19 has presented challenges to tracking progress, SEPI participants have made it clear that they’ve been able to recognize the changes happening on their campuses.

“We’re having those conversations [about] institutionalizing equity and embedding equity and practice on the academic side of the house.”

“After giving surveys, [students are] just feeling like they are included within the campus culture. They have a sense of belonging, they know how to navigate [the campus] and where to go for different resources.”

“I now hear conversations [where] the word ‘equity’ is coming into the general conversation, where it didn’t at all before. It was an abstract idea. Now people ... are actually saying ‘Well, that’s not equitable.’ And I think they really mean it. They’re understanding.”

Prioritizing Equity Moving Forward

In interviewing these participants, we’ve learned how they built on the strategies learned at SEPI to act on the visions set out in their Student Equity Plans, and to overcome resistance to build a campus environment that prioritizes equity. To sustain these efforts, community colleges must:

- 1. Believe in Equity:** Equity can become an ambiguous term—institutions must intentionally and explicitly define what equity and racial equity mean on their campuses, what they do and do not look like, and what they can do to achieve them.
- 2. Prioritize Equity:** All institution members and external stakeholders must understand that equity is the primary driver of their work, and this must be reflected across all materials—from strategic plans to social media content.
- 3. Leadership Matters:** Leaders clarify expectations, establish norms, and ensure equity is at the core of policy and practice. Leaders are the face of the movement; their commitment to the work, demonstrated through action, brings other along.
- 4. Ensure Aspiration Meets Reality:** Concrete, clearly delineated expectations and outcomes drive action. Tools, resources, and tangible action plans maximize individual commitment and accountability to contribute to equitable student outcomes.

To read our full report on the impact CUE’s SEPI had on California Community College participants and the movement toward equity they’re championing, please see the following pages.

A Movement Towards Equity:

Tracing the Impact of the Center for Urban Education’s Student Equity Planning Institute (SEPI)

In Spring 2019, over 260 community college administrators, faculty, and staff convened in Los Angeles, California to attend the Student Equity Planning Institute (SEPI). They participated with the goal of having the time, space, and needed supports to create student equity plans newly re-imagined by state policy. In sponsoring SEPI, the Center for Urban Education (CUE) committed to being a partner in the crafting of these plans, with CUE staff figuratively putting themselves in participants’ shoes to anticipate their needs and to guide in developing the vital strategies that would empower them to return to their home campuses and immediately take action. Key to this approach was centering racial equity as they developed tools to leverage the planning process as an opportunity to enact racial justice.¹ Participants were challenged to dive into the difficult, yet rewarding work of equity—to critically examine racial disparities, engage in equity planning that is race-conscious, and develop intentional and meaningful equity plans that strike at the root causes of persistent racial inequities in California’s community colleges.

After two days of hearing from four nationally recognized keynote speakers, learning alongside 28 campus teams, and working closely with 20 expert facilitators, attendees described their participation in SEPI as being empowering, insightful, eye opening, and transformative. Adela*, an administrator from Cuesta College, described SEPI as a “movement” to achieve equity. Jeff, a faculty member at Norco College, likened his experience at SEPI to being a member of a new “equity movement” and felt ready to go back to his campus and embed equity in everything they do. And while it is early yet, Ali, a faculty member at Mission College, knows that “there are people in various roles who really seem willing and able to do the complicated, super messy, fall-on-our faces work to grow” this essential “movement.”

In the pages that follow, SEPI participants from Cuesta College, Fresno City College, Mission College, and Norco College share their insights about this new movement towards equity.

* Participant names are anonymized but institutions are made public.

Prioritizing Equity: CUE, the California Community Colleges, and the Student Equity Planning Process

The California Community Colleges are the cornerstone of the state’s higher education system, enrolling upwards of 2.3 million students across its 115 unique institutions.² They are committed to providing their students with life-changing experiences that will enable them to achieve more than just a credential or a degree, but also the requisite employment and life skills that yield economic and social mobility.³ To achieve these objectives, a number of initiatives have been implemented, notably the *Vision for Success*,⁴ which calls for the reduction of equity gaps by 40 percent among racially minoritized groups.

Complementing this initiative was passage of AB 1809⁵ which revised the Student Equity Policy and established the Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) Program in 2018. This new framework aims to center equity in policy, practice, and accountability. Campus leaders are meant to feel prompted to move beyond the rhetoric of closing outcome gaps between student groups and take action to rectify unconscious biases and institutional actions that further marginalize racially minoritized students and hold them solely responsible for their achievement, or lack thereof.⁶

As a condition of receiving program funds, each community college is required to create and maintain a Student Equity Plan that denotes where significant disparities exist and articulates the goals and activities each institution will undertake to mitigate those disparities. Though these plans have been mandated since their introduction in 1992⁷, the symbolic importance of a policy labeled “student equity” and the funding that comes with it have provided an ideal opportunity for community colleges to write new student equity plans that are explicitly focused on addressing the persistent racial disparities facing students at the community colleges. Recognizing this unique opportunity, the Center for Urban Education (CUE) offered the 2-day Student Equity Planning Institute (SEPI) to provide community college administrators, faculty, and staff with the tools and resources to develop student equity plans that go beyond compliance and initiate true campus transformations. The goals of SEPI were to provide practitioners with dedicated time and space to talk about race, racism, and the causes of persistent racial inequities. This discussion would inform the development of student equity plans that genuinely address equity gaps among racially minoritized student groups. Drawing on the lifelong work of Dr. Estela Bensimon, CUE strove to center racial equity and “reclaim the anti-racist roots” of the policy, as established in its original intent.⁸

Over the course of two days, more than 260 community college stakeholders, representing 28 distinct campuses, engaged in equity-based sessions. Tactics in these sessions included data-based approaches intended to maximize student equity funds, inquiry methods to identify causes of low success and completion, strategies to talk about race and equity constructively (especially where resistance may arise), and the development of actionable practices for implementation.⁹

SEPI had a noteworthy impact on campus stakeholders. An impact assessment conducted afterwards by CUE revealed that 80% of survey respondents who attended SEPI noted an increased sense of responsibility to advance equity at their respective institutions (see FIGURE 1), 74% indicated they were more motivated to participate in equity work (see FIGURE 2), and 45% of participants expressed a significant increase in their personal commitment to equity work (see FIGURE 3).¹⁰

To better appreciate the transition from cerebrally understanding equity to taking part in equity as a “movement,” four campuses engaged in ongoing conversations with CUE staff to describe their work post-SEPI, noting what they learned, the benefits of their new knowledge, and what opportunities and/or setbacks they encountered in their efforts to prioritize equity on their campuses. Faculty and administrators from Cuesta College, Fresno City College, Mission College, and Norco College participated in initial conversations to discuss their experiences in bringing more targeted equity-focused conversations to their campuses. Outreach began in July 2019 and was followed by interviews and site visits between October and December 2019 (see Appendix 1 and 2). In total, CUE interviewed 38 campus members across the four sites. These 60 to 90 minute conversations primarily focused on understanding the utility of SEPI, the receptiveness of the campus to race-conscious efforts, and what campuses were doing to enact equity. These interviews allowed us to learn more about the application of what had been learned, the experiences implementing racial equity efforts, and the potential pushback faced on campus when trying to establish the vision set in their equity plans. Additional interviews and site visits were scheduled for March 2020 to see equity in action; however, the onslaught of COVID-19 brought an end to those plans. This report documents the experiences of 18 of the 38 administrators and faculty members interviewed after SEPI.

FIGURE 1: THE IMPACT OF SEPI ON PARTICIPANTS’ INDIVIDUAL SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR ADVANCING EQUITY

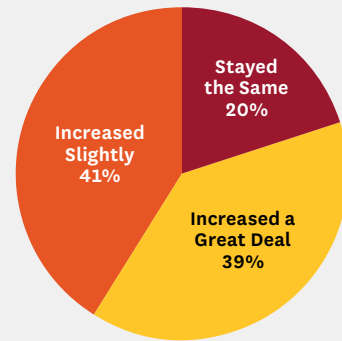


FIGURE 2: THE IMPACT OF SEPI ON PARTICIPANTS’ MOTIVATION TO ENGAGE IN EQUITY WORK

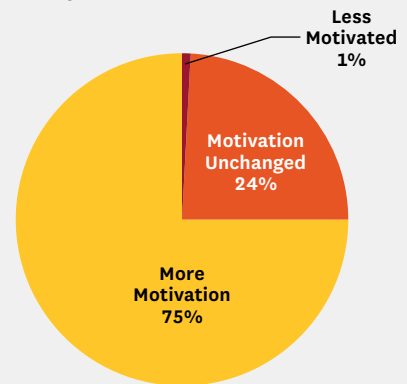
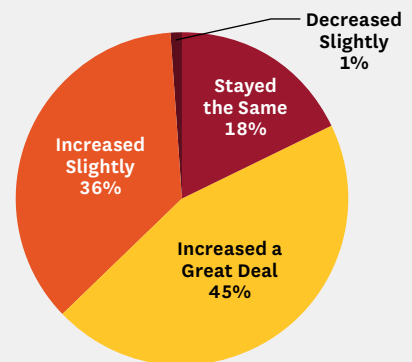


FIGURE 3: THE IMPACT OF SEPI ON PARTICIPANTS’ PERSONAL LEVEL OF COMMITMENT TO ENGAGE IN EQUITY WORK



Knowledge for Bold and Courageous Action:

Learning and Benefiting From SEPI

SEPI participants expressed a deep-rooted commitment to supporting racially minoritized students and a clear understanding of the importance of equity. Ryan, an administrator from Mission College, described his commitment to equity as stemming from his social justice background, and saw this as an opportunity to be “fair and just,” and an opportunity to critically examine structural systems that have yielded inequitable outcomes. Leila, an administrator from Norco College, described equity as doing “what’s best for our students, not what’s best for us as individuals [which] from a day-to-day perspective, [is] always about being student centered.” Though all participants were steadfast in their belief about the importance of equity, they were not as confident as to how they could realize equity on their campuses. SEPI, they said, had provided them with a valuable opportunity to understand how they can make equity an attainable goal over the course of two intensive days of learning.

Participants found value in SEPI’s coherent approach to their student equity plans for multiple reasons, among them was the exposure they had to nationally-recognized experts who could speak authentically about racial inequities and how best to address them. They likewise found value in listening to their colleagues at other institutions like Berkeley College and Santa Monica College who were able to provide real-world examples of the opportunities and challenges they faced in drafting their own student equity plans. And while a few participants expressed feeling overwhelmed, or feeling that there was simply not enough time to digest all of the information that was presented, Susan from Fresno City College said that SEPI provided the “springboard” for future conversations they would engage in once they “get back [to] work and study [racial inequities] further.”

Participants described the extent to which SEPI was able to provide a tangible structure over a policy-mandated process that was itself seemingly unstructured. They were invited to bring previously developed plans they could interrogate within the context of the new learning they acquired. Through the use of inquiry methods such as the equity word analysis, they could see the extent to which their previous efforts did or did not address inequities through a race conscious lens. Deborah, a faculty member from Cuesta College, described feeling a sense of shame from the fact that equity terms were either “masked” or were not explicitly written within their documents. She described her colleague Mai as having a similar reaction, saying she “was so affected by it ... she carried it around with her like [her personal] wall of shame.” Chris, an administrator from Mission College, discovered just how much their documents were “invalidating” as they seemed to protect the institution rather than address the needs of their students. Alberto, an administrator from Fresno City College, shared how he and his team realized while at SEPI what they needed to do differently upon returning to campus. He said, “We were already formulating a plan ... we’re changing this language [and] we’re changing these narratives to make them more race-conscious.”

Another thing that I think came out of this process that was super valuable was this ability to start talking about race, to face it head on and have these conversations without trying to be delicate, that we have to discuss these things happening to our students.

— Susan, Fresno City College

This focus on language was especially noteworthy for participants—many described feeling ill-equipped to talk about race so explicitly on campus. Alexis, a faculty member at Cuesta, shared how she felt she was “unprepared or uninformed” and did not trust that she had the knowledge base to lead discussions on this very important topic. She remarked, “That has kept me more silent.” And she remained silent until she attended SEPI, where she, along with many of those that were interviewed, realized that to do this work they needed to become comfortable with the uncomfortable. Language, as participants learned at SEPI, has a history and consequence, and it ultimately shapes and reflects one’s understanding of the world (see FIGURE 4). The differences between deficit-minded language, diversity language, and equity-minded language will yield very different outcomes for racially minoritized students, especially in colleges where faculty and leadership do not reflect the students they serve. Learning how to talk about race, racial inequities, and the systems that produce them is a requirement for equity. To not “call it out” as Alexis, a faculty member at Cuesta College, realized, is to ignore it. She said, “The most important thing I learned out of [SEPI] is that we can’t be afraid to talk about race. If we’re afraid to talk about race, then we’re perpetuating it and leaving students out.”

FIGURE 4: EQUITY LANGUAGE

Equity-Minded Language	Diversity Language	Deficit-Minded Language
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Racial/ethnic equity • Hispanic Serving Institution • Predominantly Black Institution • Ethnicity • Race/racial • Latino/a/x • African America/Black • Native American • Culturally relevant/responsive/sustaining/pedagogy • Social justice • White • Minoritized • Critically race-conscious • Anti-racist 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diversity/diverse • Culture/cultural • Underrepresented • Underserved • Multicultural • Students of color • Demographics • Minority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At risk • High need • Underprepared • Disadvantaged • Untraditional/non-traditional • Underprivileged • Learning styles • Achievement gap

Attending SEPI was inspiring and served to empower participants to be bold upon their return to campus and talk about equity in explicit and courageous ways. For some participants, like Mai, an administrator from Cuesta College, and Katie, a faculty member from Norco College, SEPI provided them with a sense of validation and credibility about what they were trying to achieve before their involvement with the student equity plans. Katie shared that it was “almost chill inducing” knowing that what she had previously learned and previously tried to implement in her classroom was aligned with what she learned at SEPI. Mai echoed those sentiments, sharing that her professional trajectory has always been within social justice, challenging systems and power to give voice to those without. SEPI has been her lifeline for crafting documents that resonate with her bent towards social justice, giving her the credibility to return to her campus and “push that [race neutral] narrative away.”

For other participants, empowerment came from the real-world examples that connected to their existing academic foundation. Collectively, this made them take an unflinching look at who they are as an institution and who they are and are not serving. Ryan, from Mission College, noted that SEPI has provided them with the opportunity to return to their campuses and “unpack” what equity means and “re-understand the commitment our college took.” But to do so, as Deborah remarked, the college needs to understand whom it is they are talking about. “[SEPI] was revolutionary ... who are ‘they’? If we don’t identify who ‘they’ are, how can we possibly serve them?” This was modeled by Berkeley College who, as Rachel, an administrator

Because we all work in our own silos here ... [SEPI] really was an opportunity for all of us to really get together and just be together so that we could build more trust, so that we could write this plan and feel confident.

— Barbara, Fresno City College

from Mission College, recalled, acknowledged their privilege as an institution and the microaggressions that may be directed at their students as a result. Their choice to include “language that could be considered a little controversial” led Rachel and the Mission College team to question, “Do we want to keep that [kind] of language in our [student equity plan]?”

SEPI participants ultimately adopted a similar approach towards their equity plans—not solely because they were confident in the knowledge they had acquired, but because they knew they would not be the lone voice on their campus talking about equity through a lens of race consciousness. SEPI gave participants the time and space to engage in candid conversations with their campus colleagues, breaking down silos and developing trust.

Jeff found the team approach at SEPI enabled him to have a different understanding and appreciation of administrators and plans because, as he said, “I’ve always looked at that kind of stuff as one, a faculty member, and two, as a plan that existed on a website and not like a living document that we’re actually working on.” And though Linda, a faculty member at Fresno City College, shared that it made her initially uncomfortable to have such a heavy focus on race, she placed her trust in her team that this approach was the right one. Ali concluded that this collaborative work was like “movement work and community work where it’s one thing to write plans and get the information, but it’s another thing to convene into a shared power and to pull each other and to push each other.”

SEPI and Why It Matters Within the Community College Context

SEPI is framed by the development of equity-minded competence,¹¹ which challenges participants to identify patterns of inequity in student outcomes given the social and historical backdrop of exclusionary practices in higher education. To do so requires administrators, faculty, and staff to be race conscious and take personal and institutional responsibility for the success of their students while critically assessing their own practices. Approaching their Student Equity Plans vis-à-vis equity-mindedness led participants to an unambiguous understanding as to why this work matters within the context of today's community college students. At the same time they understood how difficult the work would be upon their return to campus.

First, and perhaps most importantly, SEPI participants understand that equity begins and ends with students. Of the more than three million students attending a California public college or university,¹² the vast majority is enrolled in one of the state's community colleges. And of these, 70% are minoritized students.¹³ Despite their sizable presence on campus, however, evidence suggests that policies and initiatives developed over the past decade have not reduced racial disparities nor have racially minoritized groups seen improved outcomes in transfer or degree attainment.¹⁴ In 2016, this meant that only 18% of Latinx adults held an Associate's degree or higher while 32% of Black adults had some college but no degree.¹⁵ And in 2018, only 35.5% of Black students and 31.9% of Latinx students transferred within 6 years of enrollment.¹⁶ SEPI participants' work in developing their equity imperatives, exploring their equity portfolios, and analyzing institutional data disaggregated by race, gender and other equity markers made these challenges acutely real and incentivized SEPI participants to take action. Deborah, from Cuesta College remarked, "The institute and the [equity] imperative that [was] modeled for us was just so empowering. It gave us a lot of courage."

Linda from Fresno City College acknowledged being highly aware of the challenges her students face but initially thought how unfair it was that equity was only now being discussed and addressed. She explained, "these students are here now and this is my job; if I can do anything to mitigate the circumstances that they are in, [then] it's my moral obligation [to act]." Adela, administrator at Cuesta College, pointed out that there still exist structural inequities that prioritize the needs of some students over the needs of others. Her role, she said, is to "help the campus recognize that the services that we have for our 'traditional' students' are not going to be effective for the students that we work with in adult ed" for example, and she has therefore included activities in the student equity plan to help specific populations of students. In addition, Ryan from Mission College insisted they need to challenge taken-for-granted practices that persist despite their dubious efficacy. He remarked, "If we don't know who we are as practitioners, how are we supposed to serve our students? This is where the humility comes in, in terms of looking at our practices [knowing] that what's happening now may not be working."

What I'm learning is that I personally want to be intentional about all of this work. We need to build this right because this is going to be long term. And how are we going to build that culture? How are we going to have equity-advanced matriculation? How are we going to do equity pedagogy? What is that going to look like? There's an opportunity with the work that we're doing here.

— Ryan, Mission College

I think it's a lonely place ... the biggest surprise sometimes [is that colleagues] have no background in working in any social justice or diversity work ... I find that to be really challenging that we're all not in the same place, even a basis of values around this work.

— Mai, Cuesta College

SEPI participants shared just how difficult a task it is, and has been, for them to lead their campuses to become critically self-reflective of structural and systemic policies and practices that yield inequitable outcomes for minoritized students. In part, they shared, this is due to the demographic imbalance evident on college campuses where administration and faculty do not reflect the students they serve. Adela from Cuesta College, which is a predominantly White campus, said that coming back from SEPI was eye-opening in the sense that “many folks on campus didn’t like the [race conscious] verbiage and words” used in the new equity plan. Adela shared how the team came back from SEPI with a bold plan to tackle racial inequity but faced resistance by some White faculty that were “uncomfortable” with the plan, language, and intended change. Ultimately Adela continued, “faculty had some issues, we met with them and heard them out, but we stood our ground.” Leila at Norco College suggested that one of the

biggest challenges they continue to face is convincing “the majority of faculty to evaluate and reflect on their teaching practices and be willing and open to admit ... to themselves what their biases might be ... and [would] they be willing to address them?” Chris from Mission College explained that his colleagues do care and want to equitize their practices or their programs, but they just don’t know how. That said, he also noted that there are others who may resist these greater calls for equity because admitting that what they “have been doing for a long time isn’t equitable” is not something they are prepared to do.

SEPI, participants shared, gave them the tools to counter what Jenn, a faculty member from Norco College, described as “fragility” on campus and the active resistance it brings about in colleagues who are not in favor of the changes being proposed and attempt to silence those advocating for change. She said these colleagues are those who are “used to being autonomous” and having someone enter their space feels intrusive. Her challenge and that of her team is how to invite them into the equity space and “ask them to be courageous.” Unfortunately, as Alberto from Fresno City College suggested, this is especially difficult to do because there is a singular discomfort talking about racial equity. To counter this resistance, SEPI participants have assumed an advocate’s stance, strategically embedding equity in all that they do: within their classrooms, in their committee meetings, and in personal one-on-one conversations with colleagues. Audre, who holds a prominent academic position at Fresno City College, indicated, “I have made equity part of what we say and do.” Linda also from Fresno City, is now strategically lending her voice to champion equity. “I knew that I had a voice with instructional faculty ... that I would have pull with the faculty, particularly with the Academic Senate where decisions were being made.” Jeff at Norco talked about working with faculty to identify “hidden values” in the classroom because, as his colleague Starling, also a faculty member, said, “If you’re going to be a good teacher, you have to be equity minded ... good teaching is good equity teaching.”

SEPI participants believe in the change they are advocating for, they hope to see increased awareness on campus about racial inequities, and they are working diligently to change the hearts and minds of their campus colleagues. Alexis from Cuesta College stated, “I’m committing to do it better and to be brave and to speak up ... if we don’t demonstrate equity across disciplines and departments, how are we supposed to have conversations about racial equity for our students?” But this is hard work. No one person or even a single team can nurture this movement alone. Support is needed and accountability is required. Greater intentionality from leadership is essential so that they are not just “passive allies,” as Chris from Mission College suggested, but are ready to make “equity a priority with a deadline and with accountability,” exerting “pressure to move” action forward. Above all, those leading the charge need leadership to offer guidance and ensure that, as Alexis from Cuesta College stated, “equity penetrates every other plan on campus.” Because to do otherwise, as Emilio, an administrator from Norco College, discovered, “equity [is] lost in the shuffle” of multiple plans and initiatives. Ryan at Mission College pointed out, “There’s no playbook or handbook on how to do this work.”

Realizing the Promise of Equity:

The Impact of SEPI on Campus

Though this project was cut short by COVID, and CUE has been unable to see the effects of SEPI participants' efforts, their sharing makes it clear that change was coming to their campuses. Cain, an administrator at Fresno City College, noted, "We're having those conversations [about] institutionalizing equity and embedding equity and practice on the academic side of the house," and considering how they will be able to pay for these deliberate efforts to prioritize equity. Cuesta College has initiated changes to the services they provide for students that are not on campus during "traditional" school hours and/or require uniquely tailored supports. Adela reported, "After giving surveys, [students are] just feeling like they are included within the campus culture. They have a sense of belonging, they know how to navigate [the campus] and where to go for different resources." Fresno City College has an equity question that was receiving insufficient responses in their program review, but after consulting with the equity committee, they've identified a better, more reflective way to respond to the question. Other campuses have reimagined their hiring practices, the questions they use to identify more equity-minded practitioners, and the training they provide once those individuals are hired to maintain an equity focus in their day-to-day work.

What stands out predominantly for SEPI participants is that the message at the core of their advocacy and the very difficult conversations they've initiated is beginning to take hold. Though there once was active resistance (and pockets of resistance persist), SEPI participants persisted, understanding the value of continuing conversations, hearing the concerns, and reserving judgment on the feedback received. And in doing so, they are raising awareness, demystifying what equity is, and slowly moving away from race-neutral language and the belief that equity is about "making services better for everybody." Though Susan, a faculty member at Fresno City College, described the challenge of implementing "big ideas" and just how "tough it is to actually get traction" to do so, Rachel at Mission College shared, "The last year is kind of like the tipping point. I now hear conversations [where] the word 'equity' is coming into the general conversation, where it didn't at all before. It was an abstract idea. Now people ... are actually saying 'Well, that's not equitable.' And I think they really mean it. They're understanding." This feedback from participants is invaluable as we learned how SEPI training on equity-mindedness and race-consciousness was used not only in the planning process, but diffused across each campus to help their community learn about racial inequity, the need for explicit language, and how efforts developed in the equity plan could lead towards more racially just community colleges.

I feel like we're deep in the process and I don't know when the end is. Maybe there isn't an end, but we're doing stuff. It feels at times a little bit like walking around in a dark room where you don't know where the furniture is. We're going to crack our shins a couple of times, but I think we're at least trying. And there's a dedicated group who really wants to make this a more equitable experience for our students. And I think we have a lot of support around campus. It doesn't feel like we're running into an adversarial headwind. People really do think for the most part that this is important.

— Jeff, Norco College

Supporting a Movement Towards Equity

Participant reflections have produced a wealth of information that articulate how participants benefited from SEPI and the extent to which those benefits are aiding them in the implementation of their Student Equity Plans for 2019-2022. These reflections have likewise revealed that participants have faced adversity and resistance within their institutions. They shared the strategies they learned at SEPI to “weave a cohesive [equity] line through what we’re doing” and to build an ecosystem that prioritizes equity and takes root within the culture of their campuses. To sustain these efforts, community colleges must:

- **BELIEVE IN EQUITY.** Equity can be an amorphous, aspirational value that is not easily translatable into action. Equity has become a common phrase, potentially appropriated and diluted, in its bold embrace of critical and anti-racist foundations.¹⁷ Institutional actors must intentionally engage in the difficult conversation to define what equity and racial equity mean on their campuses, what it does and does not look like, and what they can do to achieve it. The Vision for Success lays out an incredibly ambitious timeline to eliminate equity gaps for Black, Latinx, AAPI, Veterans, LGBTQ and other marginalized students. Campus faculty and staff must be ready and willing to engage in these conversations about the country’s history of racial injustice and persistent discrimination that have yielded structural and systemic inequities against communities of color as well as the impact they have had on students’ access, opportunity, and success.
- **PRIORITIZE EQUITY.** It must be understood by all institutional actors and external stakeholders that equity is the primary driver of their work. This prioritization must be reflected in all institutional actions, whether they be within campus discussions among faculty and staff, or explicitly articulated in written documents that are prominently featured on strategic plans, learning materials, or social media content.
- **LEADERSHIP MATTERS.** Who leads and how they lead matters when doing equity work. Leaders have the capacity to clarify expectations, establish norms, and lead the work that must take place to ensure equity is the core function of policy and practice. Beyond that, leaders are the recognized face of the movement—they are the ones who are entrusted to shepherd the work even in times of crisis and resistance. Knowing they are committed to the work, are trustworthy and transparent, and will provide the necessary supports, resources, and frameworks to carry their colleagues—from the most passionate to the most disinvested—will ensure that the words on paper are more than just aspirations, and that they yield action.
- **ENSURING ASPIRATION MEETS REALITY.** At its core, doing equity work requires a fundamental belief that prioritizing equity is necessary, that racial injustice has contributed to inequitable outcomes for specific communities, and that intentional and targeted action will lead to more inclusive environments for systemically disenfranchised students and communities. But the work needs to be concrete, with clearly delineated expectations and outcomes, feature plans of actions, and provide the requisite tools and resources to ensure increased faculty understanding of what equity is and what it looks like, so as to maximize individual commitment and accountability for the campus’s equity efforts to take hold and reach fruition. This includes, but is not limited to, syllabus redesign, inquiry dialogues, ongoing examination of disaggregated data, continuous professional development opportunities, courageous “call outs” by allies, and the implementation of policies, processes, and structures that facilitate difficult conversations and actions to be taken.

Conclusion

For Mai, there remains a certain amount of discomfort in her role as a champion for equity at Cuesta College. She worries that she may say something that will make someone take offense. But if they are to finally realize the promise of opportunity that community colleges represent, she understands being comfortable is not an option. Through SEPI, Mai said, “I’ve been able to take that knowledge and experience and just even on that basic level, bring it to Cuesta and know that the work that we have to do is internally around breaking down racist institutional practices.” The state’s promise of opportunity rings hollow for Black, Latinx, and other minoritized populations whose dreams-deferred result not from a lack of will, but from historically imposed, racially motivated barriers that remain unchanged and unacknowledged. The student equity plans, however, mandated by policy and funded by the state, bring the California Community Colleges closer to eliminating persistent racial disparities and inequitable outcomes largely experienced by minoritized students.

The Center for Urban Education developed the Student Equity Planning Institute with the intent to maximize this unique opportunity for all 28 participating campuses and the over 260 individuals that attended. The follow-up interviews with Cuesta College, Fresno City College, Mission College, and Norco College participants provided CUE with insight and knowledge into the application of what was learned at SEPI and how specific resources were used to meet the challenge of racial inequity. As Jeff, from Norco College stated, “Having evidence based information ... and setting goals around your own numbers, that is something to work with. And then the ideas of what does equity mean and how often should we be talking about it is embedded in everything we do. [That is what] we who come out of the equity movement [are now doing].” SEPI participants have made the commitment and begun the hard work to center equity on their campuses. Ryan at Mission College proudly declared, “We’re able to have [these conversations] because we’re able to create a space where we’ve created trust. People were being raw and authentic. That’s what I mean by equity in action, or equity in real time.”

Though some uncertainty remains about the work and the toll it takes on campus equity warriors, they are confident that the movement towards equity is taking hold and have hope that equity is understood, is tangible, and will yield the transformative change needed for minoritized students in the California Community Colleges.

We have to be intentional and radical ... and just get away from traditional ways of doing, which in some areas we’re moving the needed. It’s moving, It’s moving like molasses but it’s moving. But there’s a lot that has to change.

— Alexis, Cuesta College

Notes

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Appendix I: Case Study Context

Campus	Individuals Interviewed	Student Population	% Students of Color	% Faculty of Color	Graduation Rate	Transfer-Out Rate
Fresno City College	8	24,000	80%	35%	21%	6%
Norco College	13	11,000	74%	37%	27%	9%
Cuesta College	9	11,000	45%	19%	38%	10%
Mission College	8	8,000	80%	36%	31%	11%

Appendix II: Cuesta College Profile

Cuesta College, located in San Luis Obispo, is among the smaller of the California Community Colleges. With an enrollment of approximately 17,337 in the 2018-19 academic years, Cuesta College accounts for 0.73% of the state’s community college students. In 2016, the college was recognized as a Hispanic Serving Institution with nearly 35% of students enrolled identifying as Latinx.

In the Student Equity Plan for 2019-2022, Cuesta College acknowledges that they are not doing enough to serve students that have been historically underserved by institutions of higher education, observing that year after year they have underperformed in their service to Black, Latinx, and other minoritized students. They say:

Our underperformance vis-à-vis minoritized students needs to be discussed openly and routinely to inform the actions we take. It is the responsibility of the College, to improve our performance to the standard that maximizes success for all students. Equity focused institutional change requires us to examine our own entrenched practices and intentionally work towards dismantling the status quo as opposed to blaming students for our shortcomings.¹

Given these identified equity gaps, their equity imperative is to reduce racial and ethnic gaps by 40% for Latinx students and other disproportionately impacted groups. Cuesta recognizes that though they have a talented corps of administrators, faculty, counselors, and other professionals, to do the work of equity they must examine their “own entrenched practices and intentionally work towards dismantling the status quo as opposed to blaming students” for the college’s shortcomings. Cuesta will provide administrators and faculty with equity-focused training in targeted areas, including: examining the impact of white privilege in education; how best to support men of color; offering culturally relevant pedagogy/contextualized learning; creating awareness of implicit bias and hiring; offering equity-minded syllabi review; and fostering antiracist/social justice strategies for teaching.²

These professional development opportunities—when combined with other resources and the college’s commitment “to create a strong culture of diversity, inclusion, and equity” on campus—give Cuesta College confidence that its Student Equity Plan provides them with the “opportunity to be the catalyst for change and a call to action.”

Cuesta College Equity Imperatives

Equity Effort	Description	Target Group	Focal Area
Program Mapping	Developing Hispanic Serving Institution Teacher Pathways grant activities to expand collaboration and support of Latina Leadership Network (LLN) and other Latinx targeted activities.	Latinx Students	Transfer
Targeted Academic/ Student Support Services	It is important that Cuesta’s counseling systems/structures communicate the benefits of working with a counselor in order to access accurate information early on in students’ educational path. Students reiterated the need to have the whole student taken into account as community college students often have complicated schedules with added financial pressures. This is particularly true for First Generation students, Latinx students, and African American/Black students, who often work to help support their families.	Latinx Students	Transfer
Targeted Academic/ Student Support Services	As a Hispanic Serving Institution, it is important that our Latinx students are encouraged and recognized for their capabilities. Our Guided Pathways efforts must be in alignment with the onboarding process so that the whole student is considered during student advising.	Black and Latinx Men	Transfer Level-Math & English

1. Cuesta College. (n.d.). *Student Equity Plan*. <https://www.cuesta.edu/about/documents/collegeplans-docs/2019-college-plans/2019-2022-StudentEquityPlan.pdf>

2. <https://nova.cccco.edu/sep/plans/6797/preview>

Appendix III: Fresno City College Profile

Fresno City College was the first community college in California, opening its doors in 1910 to meet the collegiate needs of students in the San Joaquin Valley. Fresno City College was the 9th largest California community college in 2018-19 and enrolled nearly 38,000 students. More than half of its student population is Latinx, which gives Fresno City College the distinction of being a Hispanic Serving Institution. Guided by their core values of growth, leadership, and success, their vision is to engage their faculty, staff, and students in a partnership that will “transform lives through education.”¹

As a Hispanic Serving Institution, they are committed to improving outcomes for the college’s racially and ethnically diverse student body. In their Student Equity Plan for 2019-2022,² Fresno City College recognizes the unique opportunity they have to raise awareness and critically examine the root causes and effects that racial and ethnic inequities have on their students. Fresno City College defines student equity as:

The identification and removal of barriers that have prevented the full participation of historically marginalized and underrepresented student populations with the goal of eliminating identified differences in outcomes between those populations and the student population as a whole.

The Student Equity Plan is seen by Fresno City as not a requirement to be fulfilled, but as a catalyst for change in student equity outcomes.³ Moreover, they make clear that equality and equity are not synonymous. Equity is the work an institution must undertake to ensure students, whatever their backgrounds, have the resources and supports needed to equitably achieve their goals.

Fresno City Colleges is committed to building a culture of inquiry with student equity at its core that includes a number of critical activities to engage faculty and staff in frank and open dialogue to address the state of equity at the college and reduce gaps by 40% among the most disproportionately impacted student groups. Some of the identified activities include the examination of quantitative and qualitative data to identify which students are experiencing inequitable outcomes and appreciative inquiry to holistically address barriers in attitudes and dispositions, politics and power, policies, structures, institutional culture, instructional and student services practices, and data practices. The college believes these efforts will yield the necessary change to achieve their equity change goals for identified groups.

Fresno City College Equity Imperatives

Equity Effort	Description	Target Group	Focal Area
Interdisciplinary Faculty Equity Lab: Equity-Minded Tools for Reflective Teaching Practice	FCC will create a train-the-trainer, cohort model group of interdisciplinary faculty who will learn how to use equity-minded tools for reflective teaching and learning. Examples of some topics include course level data analysis, syllabi review, peer observations, institutional agents, and teaching and learning for equity.	All racially minoritized students	Student Retention
CORA Online Training Certificate Programs	1) Teaching Men of Color in the Community College: This course provides community college instructional faculty with strategies and approaches that can be used to foster enhanced learning among college men of color; (2) Supporting Men of Color in the Community College: This course provides community college advisors, student service officers, counselors, and support staff with strategies and approaches that can be used to foster enhanced learning, development, and success among college men of color.	Men of Color	Transfer
Increase Transfer Center Staffing to Support Equity-Centered Practices	In order to achieve this standard, Transfer Centers not only need equity-minded strategies, but they require adequate staffing to implement those strategies. Therefore, an increase in counseling faculty is needed for the Transfer Center. Additionally, it is important to have stability in staffing in order to oversee and implement student transfer interventions over multiple years. For this reason, an additional full-time counselor will be hired to focus on supporting equity-centered transfer activities.	All racially minoritized students	Transfer

1. Fresno City College. (n.d.) *Mission, vision, core values and ethics statement*. <https://www.fresnocitycollege.edu/about/mission-statement.html>

2. Fresno City College. (n.d.) *Student Equity Plan*. <https://www.fresnocitycollege.edu/.../Student-Equity-Plan-Executive-Summary.pdf>

3. Fresno City College. (n.d.) *Office of Student Equity*. <https://www.fresnocitycollege.edu/faculty-and-staff/resource-guide/student-equity.html>

Appendix IV: Mission College Profile

Located in the heart of Silicon Valley, Mission College is dedicated to serving the diverse educational needs of its students by providing equitable access and supports towards completion of a degree or credential.¹ A little over 14,000 students enrolled at the college in 2018-19, 34% of whom were Asian with 23% Latinx. Adhering to the values of social justice, equity, excellence, and inclusivity, Mission College aims to empower every student to find their mission.

Mission College’s Student Equity Plan for 2019-2022 centers on student equity in order to address persistent equity gaps that primarily affect Latinx, Black, Pacific Islander and first-generation students on their campus. Moreover, they monitor emerging disproportionately impacted groups such as American Indian/Native American DACA/Dreamers, LGBTQI+, Students with Disabilities, Filipino, Foster Youth, Homeless, Parent-Students, and Veterans. In centering equity, they will provide the necessary individual support these students need to meet and exceed the common standards of the college. To do so will require faculty and staff at Mission to receive the needed resources that will aid them in recognizing inequities and changing policies, processes, and practices. Guiding their work is the college’s equity framework, which will help faculty and staff to develop their own equity lenses, inform inquiry and monitoring of activities, enhance their efforts to transform the college’s institutional practices, and ultimately create equitable outcomes for all students.²

As both a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) and an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI), Mission College faculty and staff acknowledge, “providing each unique student population with the exact same resources (equality) will ultimately not help in closing such gaps. Educational equity, on the other hand, asks that educators provide all students with the individual support they need to reach and exceed a common standard.” To ensure the success of their unique student populations, they will engage in difficult conversations to address the “systemic work to be done” about campus racial dynamics and reflective of practices, behaviors, and other social interactions that may unintentionally cause harm to these groups. Mission College faculty and staff believe that “focusing on the needs of the most marginalized ultimately benefits the entire campus community.”

Mission College Equity Imperatives

Equity Effort	Description	Target Group	Focal Area
Equity Professional Learning Institute	Institutionalize or create equity professional learning institute for all college employees in collaboration with the newly funded professional development coordinator position to develop the following: a) Communities of Practice; b) Train Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) Coaches in each division and the curriculum committee on strategies for assessment, alignment of pedagogy and curriculum with the framework of CRT and our equity framework; c) Offer monthly seminars on High Impact Practices for socio-emotional learning, culturally responsive engagement, mindfulness, harm-reduction, growth-mindset, etc.	Black and Latinx Students	Access
Umoja Program	Development of an Umoja Program (Learning Community model with a focus on African American students)	Black Students	Completion
Cross Cultural Center	Development of a Cross Cultural Center to serve as a hub of activities and support for populations such as Dreamers, Foster Youth, Homeless, LGBTQI+, etc.	Black and Latinx Students	Access

1. Mission College. (n.d.). *About Mission College*. https://missioncollege.edu/gen_info/mission.html

2. Mission College. (n.d.). *Student Equity Plan 2019-2022*. http://www.missioncollege.edu/student_services/student_equity/index.html

Appendix V: Norco College Profile

Norco College became the 112th California Community College in 2010 with a vision to change the trajectory of students' lives. Equity lies within its core commitments, as Norco will engineer and sustain an "environment where student success is realized by all groups with proportionate outcomes."¹ In 2018-19, Norco enrolled 15,280 students, 58% of whom were Latinx and 22% were White, Non-Hispanic.

In its Student Equity Plan for 2019-2022, Norco College's equity imperative is to close equity gaps for historically minoritized students, specifically Black and Latinx students, who collectively account for 64.6% of their student body. They will do so with a sense of urgency and with the full acknowledgement of the role Norco has played in perpetuating these equity gaps. They say:

Targeted interventions and support for Latinx and Black students have been confined to historically unfunded/under-funded special programs, such as Puente and Umoja. Like many institutions, Norco College has provided one-size fits all approach to student success. This race-blind approach fails to recognize the embedded structural racism that American institutions of higher education were founded on when Black Americans were denied the right to an education. We maintain the legacy of historical oppression on minoritized students by making invisible our collective institutional responsibility for equitable outcomes for all students, especially for Latinx and Black students.²

Their equity priority will be "to address [their] lack of institutional knowledge and practice as agents of racial equity" and understand that "Equity work is a campus wide effort and everyone has a role and responsibility in helping to close equity gaps." They will therefore address these historical actions by taking on the role of agents of racial equity, whose equity work will be race-conscious, intentional in its focus, student-centered, accountable for institutional expectations, data driven, and adhering to continuous evaluation. Faculty and staff will approach their pedagogical and organizational practices through an equity-minded lens, assessing the degree to which their policies and practices contribute to persistent inequitable outcomes among Black and Latinx students, as well as men of color and foster youth. To achieve equity-mindedness, faculty and staff will receive professional development and training opportunities to analyze disaggregated data, adopt culturally responsive assessment practices, practice equity-based pedagogy that is student centered, and embrace Guided Pathways support to increase student completion.

These efforts in addition to targeted student supports will enable Norco College achieve its equity goals.

Norco College Equity Imperatives

Equity Effort	Description	Target Group	Focal Area
Umoja Village Space (6)	The college will designate a space on campus for Umoja personnel to build community with participants. The space will house the Umoja Counselor/Coordinator, Student Success Coach, and peer mentors. The space will serve as a hub for students to interact with program personnel, meet with peer mentors, complete counseling appointments, and gather for social events.	Black	Attainment
Associate Degrees for Transfer Workshops (10)	Counselors will conduct in-class workshops on Associate Degrees of Transfer (ADTs) to increase completion and transfer. Umoja and Puente sponsored courses will be targeted for this activity. Other courses with high enrollments of LGBTQ, foster youth, and African American students will also be targeted.	Black	Transfer
Equity Focused Community of Practice (7)	Math and English disciplines will engage in actively developing communities of practice focused on researching and developing culturally relevant lessons and activities for disproportionately impacted (DI) student populations. Math and English faculty will pilot best practices in courses with high enrollments of DI students. Courses will be supported with embedded tutoring and supplemental instruction. Math and English faculty will also work towards developing themed classes for DI student populations, including foster youth, LGBTQ, African American, and Latinx.	Black and Latinx Students	Transfer Level-Math & English

1. Norco College. (n.d.) *Mission and Core Commitments*. <https://www.norcocollege.edu/about/Pages/mission.aspx>

2. Norco College. (n.d.) *Grants and Student Equity Initiatives*. <https://www.norcocollege.edu/services/sei/Pages/index.aspx>

