

# Ensure Students Are Learning:

Equity-minded approaches for cultivating student engagement in the classroom

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Fostering a classroom environment where students from diverse racial backgrounds are engaged equitably can be challenging for community college educators, especially when considering the varying needs of each student. Students from racially minoritized backgrounds comprise over 50% of community college enrollments (American Association of Community Colleges, 2019). As community college campuses continue to broaden in terms of participation, respective to students' racial and ethnic identities, it is important that educators adopt an equity-minded approach to ensure students are learning through the Guided Pathways Model. This model serves as a resource for higher education faculty and staff, namely at community colleges, to better improve college completion rates, transfer, and attainment of jobs with value in the student labor market. Guided Pathways has multiple phases, and the authors will focus on the implementation phase that identifies best practices that foster student engagement in the classroom in equity-minded ways.

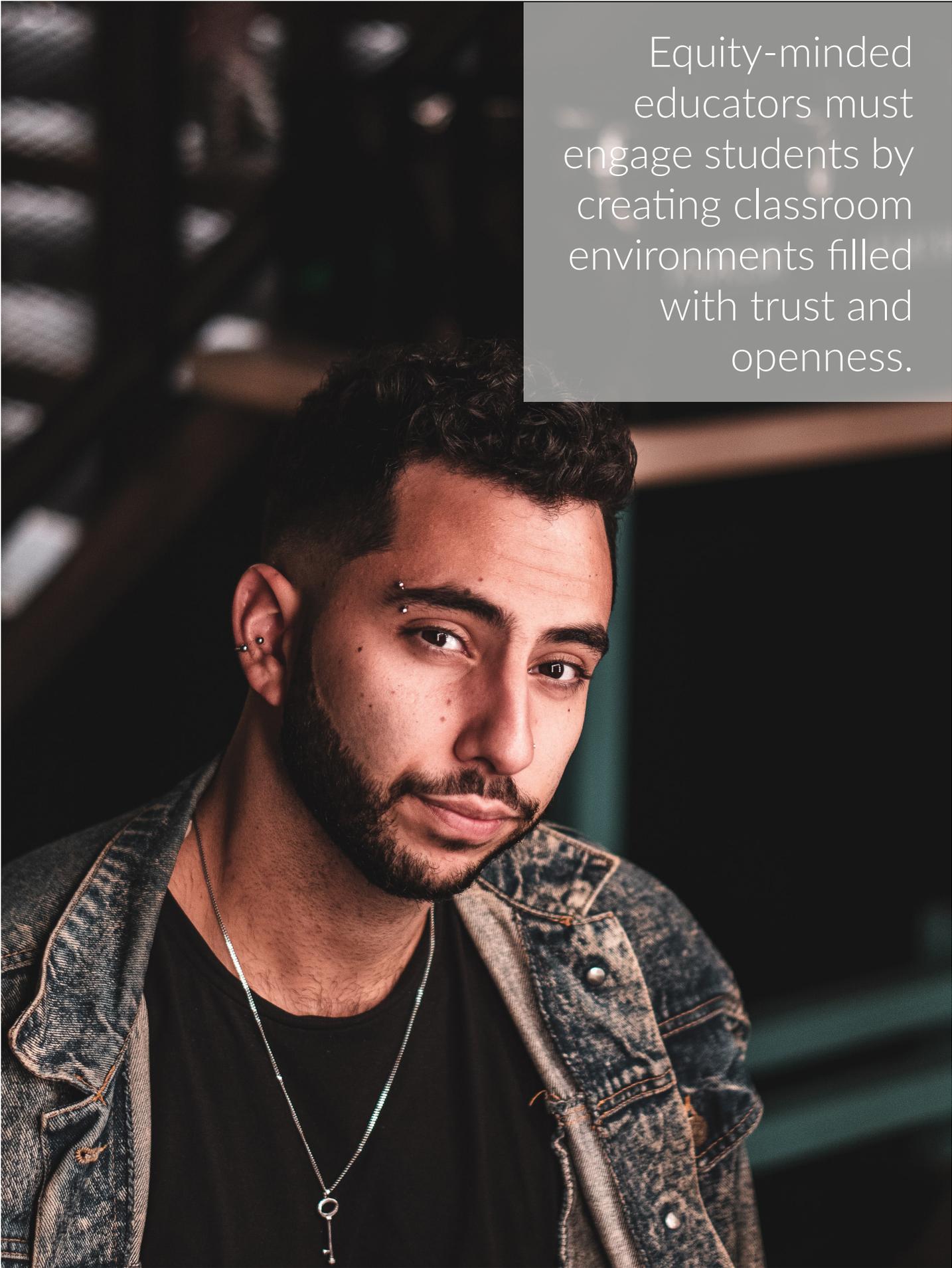
The classroom is one of the most critical parts of the collegiate experience to ensure student learning and engagement. Though to be effective, educators must be equity-minded in all facets of their role. Bensimon (2007) asserts that equity-minded educators recognize the inequitable systems and dominant power structures that incessantly disadvantage and exclude students belonging to racially minoritized backgrounds. These inequitable systems and dominant power structures are reinforced by acts of racism, a lack of culturally responsive pedagogical practices, and limited course material that fails to meet the specific learning needs of each student. Bensimon (2007) notes that equity-minded educators attribute unequal outcomes for students of color, in comparison to their white peers, to dysfunctions and underperformance of the institution of higher learning. Conversely, educators who are deficit-minded correlate unequal outcomes to the students of colors' capabilities and meager preparation for postsecondary success. All community college educators must be equity-minded, not deficit-minded, because equity-minded educators think critically about their role and complicity in

promoting student success, specifically within the classroom.

These individuals accept student success as their responsibility and are willing to do what it takes to ensure all students, particularly those from disadvantaged racial backgrounds, are engaged and learning the course content in meaningful ways. Equity-minded educators are also influencing their colleagues to adopt similar ideologies. In this way, students can construct new knowledge and build on what was previously known and then apply it to experiences that will benefit them outside of the classroom.

Equity-minded educators understand that the mere attendance of students from racially minoritized backgrounds in the classroom is not enough to assess their learning. Every decision must be intentional to engage these students effectively. Equity-mindedness can lead to students of color feeling a sense of belonging. When students of color feel a sense of belonging in the classroom, their faculty and peers accept them, both physically and psychologically. They can express all aspects of their beliefs and minoritized social identities without having to hide or feel excluded from the campus environment. A sense of belonging also improves retention and persistence toward college completion for students of color (Strayhorn, 2018).

Equity-minded educators must engage students by creating classroom environments filled with trust and openness. This is done by forming authentic partnerships with students. They must first recognize their positionalities in terms of the educator and student dynamic. By default, educators hold positional power due to the nature of their role and responsibility for grading students' work. Educators must be mindful of not abusing this power as a result of students having differing ideological opinions or beliefs from their own, especially when discussing issues of race. They also must recognize and understand how their own social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, and sexual orientation) are sources of privilege or oppression. Based on the source, this will impact students' feelings and biases toward them. This is critical praxis when working with



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students from racially minoritized groups. Equity-minded educators recognize that institutionalized systems of oppression are the root causes of the inequitable treatment of students of color and must be willing to dismantle the hegemonic structures that perpetuate these behaviors. Therefore, educators, particularly those belonging to dominant racial (white) and gender (male) groups, must practice being mindful of how their well-intended comments, methods of instruction, and biases impact each student differently in the classroom.

When equity-minded educators engage students as part of classroom instruction, they are encouraged to utilize a range of practices that assess and enrich student learning, as noted in the Guided Pathways Model. These practices include applied learning experiences that are scaled, high-quality, and program-relevant; intentional and sustained student engagement; evidence-based, high-impact teaching practices across modalities; institutional commitment to equity-minded, asset-based teaching improvement; and quality assessment of program learning outcomes that lead to credentials, further education, and/or gainful employment. These practices are detailed below.

### **Scaled, high-quality, program-relevant applied learning experiences**

Applied learning experiences are opportunities that educators provide in which students can incorporate the knowledge they have learned and apply it to new curricular and co-curricular experiences. Community colleges have incorporated this practice, mainly through work-based learning models that include apprenticeships, clinical placements, internships, school-based enterprises, and service learning and community-based learning (Rodriguez, Fox, & McCambly, 2016). For example, Sauk Valley Community College enhanced employer partnerships to create paid internship opportunities that align with workforce needs for students in the MultiCraft Technology program (Rockey, 2017; Sauk Valley Community College, 2020). One critical characteristic of these approaches is that they are “student-centered,” which means the focus is on the student. Faculty members should consciously develop pedagogies that are tailored to

each student’s learning style and ability (Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy, 2010). This is done by asking open-ended questions, respecting each student’s point of view, and encouraging all students to be a part of the decision-making process as related to their education (Teaching Excellence in Adult Literacy, 2010).

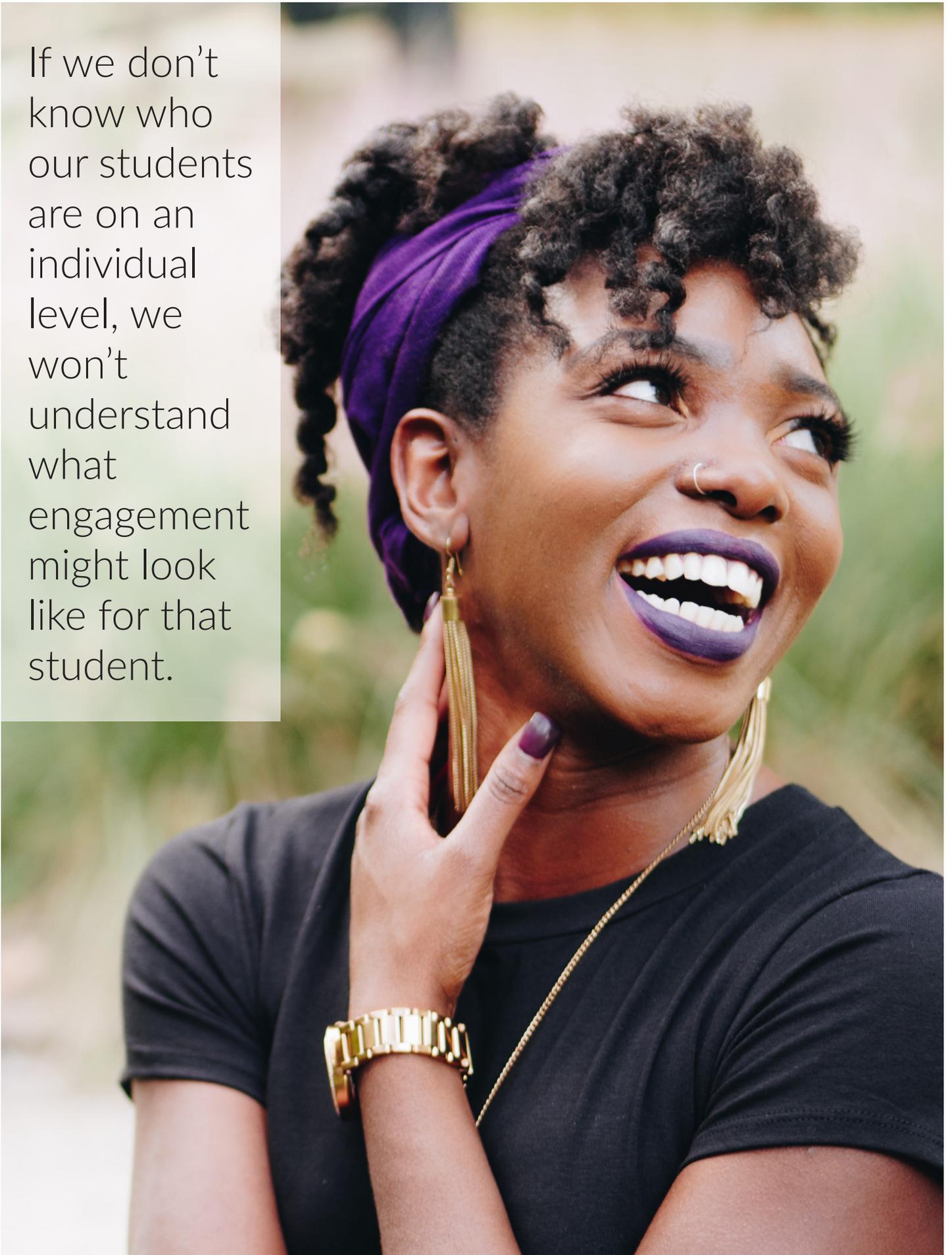
### **Intentional and sustained student engagement**

Equity-minded educators should be mindful that building relationships with students is pertinent to intentional and sustained student engagement in the classroom. If we don’t know who our students are on an individual level, we won’t understand what engagement might look like for that student. For example, how might engagement in the classroom look different for a student who is attending an early-morning class after working an overnight shift? As we set our classroom expectations at the beginning of each semester, how do we define what engagement looks like and provide various means by which to become engaged? How do we know that our materials are engaging and affirming for racially minoritized students? A critical part of this is involving students in this conversation and soliciting feedback throughout the course.

### **Evidence-based, high-impact teaching practices across modalities**

Hatch, Crisp, and Wesley (2016) identify “service learning, community-based learning, diversity/global learning, writing-intensive coursework, common intellectual experiences, and collaborative assignments and projects,” as high-impact practices that can be applied in the classroom (p. 13). The classroom can be a strong site for disrupting epistemologies of ignorance (Cabrera, 2018; Mills, 1997). Equity-minded educators are encouraged to implement collaborative projects that allow students to work together. Facilitating cross-racial interactions in the classroom can have positive effects on students’ intellectual, social, and civil development (Chang, Mitchell, Astin, & Kim, 2004).

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In addition, cross-racial interactions can promote racial understanding for white students and challenge dominant beliefs, stereotypes, and assumptions rooted in racism. The importance of assessing these practices across modalities and demographics cannot be overstated with student experiences consistently differing more “within campuses than across them” (Finley, 2019, p. 8).

### **Institutional commitment to equity-minded, asset-based teaching improvement**

With faculty demographics not aligning with student demographics in community colleges, it is critically important to engage in professional development that advances cultural competence and prioritizes institutional support for closing existing equity gaps in student outcomes. Characteristics of equity-minded assessment include meaningful student involvement; data disaggregation, exploration, and action; context-specific approaches and responses; and embedding equity across assessment efforts (Montenegro & Jankowski, 2020). Rather than pointing to student deficits, equity-minded educators work toward understanding individual biases and disrupting pedagogies and practices that create and maintain homogeneity in single courses, programs, careers, and institutions.

### **Quality assessment of program learning outcomes that lead to credentials, further education, and/or gainful employment**

In order for students to experience success, program learning outcomes must align with the expectations of future employers and/or transfer institutions. Institutional agents should ensure that, as part of reviewing program outcomes, data are disaggregated to identify equity gaps in student outcomes and initiate program improvement (Bragg, 2017). Equity-minded educators understand that a student's racial identity will impact their classroom and overall academic program experiences. Therefore, they should be able to identify how institutional leaders can make changes to student programs and curriculum to advance equitable outcomes.

This is critical praxis in all subject areas, especially in courses that engage students on social issues.

### **Conclusion**

The implementation of multifaceted approaches to supporting students inside and outside of the classroom is well aligned with the work of Guided Pathways that centers on a redesign of the full student experience (Karp, 2016). While this brief centers on practices identified in the Guided Pathways Model, reflecting on pedagogical practices is central to becoming equity-minded educators. Paris (2012) coined the term “culturally sustaining pedagogy” to describe that which supports students by “sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence” (Paris, 2012, p. 95). As faculty build relationships with students and understand barriers to student engagement that exist at the institutional and system levels, they can become leaders of change at their institutions.



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