

# Community Colleges as Racialized Organizations: Outlining Opportunities for Equity

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this article is to use Victor Ray's theory of racialized organizations (TRO), and multiple applied exemplars, as a framework and call to action for community college researchers and policymakers. In doing so, we provide a meso-level analytic view on how and why the most accessible postsecondary pathway for minoritized students is also the most chronically under-resourced sector of higher education in the United States. **Argument:** Understanding community colleges as a type of racialized organization opposes traditional meritocratic perspectives that view these institutions as culturally neutral spaces, guided by open access and unrestricted credential choice. Decades of research suggest that egalitarian principles attached to community colleges do not necessarily translate into equitable student experiences and outcomes. Responses to these inequitable outcomes, however, primarily assign blame to individual dispositions. Without deep consideration of contextual conditions that shape organizational policies and practices, outcome disparities are viewed as a condition of cultural deficits rather than structured impotence. **Conclusions:** This paper advances our collective attunement, as community college scholars, to organizational arrangements that perpetuate and weaken white supremacy. In short, we use a racialized organizational lens to think in new ways about how community colleges, as an institutional type, are often as marginalized as the students they serve.

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Although nearly half of all students of color enrolled in U.S. postsecondary education attend a community college (American Association of Community Colleges, 2022; Long, 2016), decades of research suggest that the egalitarian principles of community colleges do not necessarily translate to racially equitable student experiences or outcomes (Baber et al., 2019; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Crisp & Núñez, 2014; Dougherty & Kienzl, 2006; Dowd, 2007; Rhoads & Valadez, 1996). Indeed, demographic arguments are common refrains in the community college literature, that is, minoritized students disproportionately attend community colleges, therefore they are critical sites for intervening in racial inequity. However, this refrain implicitly encourages an individually focused perspective on the problem of racial inequity; it is positioned as a consequence of enrolling minoritized students. As a result, community college leaders routinely struggle with dismantling white normative organizational policies and practices that sustain racially hostile campus environments and racialized inequities that collectively erode community colleges' full potential (Cuellar & Johnson-Ahorlu, 2016; Neal & Georges, 2020). Given both their political origins (Dougherty, 1994), their historical position within a "structure of educational and social stratification" (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 10), and their place in contemporary discourses on racial equity in education (e.g., Ching et al., 2020; Eddy, 2018; Felix, 2021), we argue that community colleges can be understood as a racialized sub-category among institutions of higher education.

Toward more fully realizing these institutions' potential, we position community colleges as racialized organizations and in doing so oppose traditional meritocratic perspectives that view these institutions as culturally neutral, race-evasive spaces, guided by open access and unrestricted credential choice. Specifically, based on our presidential session at the Council for the Study of Community Colleges annual conference in 2022, we draw from Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations (TRO) to consider (a) how normative racialized frames combine with organizational processes to (re)produce status quo outcomes; and (b) the role of emancipatory frames in reshaping organizational processes to sustain racialized, equitable outcomes. More specifically, the community response to our presidential panel inspired us to put forward, in this article, a more cohesive set of insights and exemplars to illustrate how an analytic lens on the racialized dynamics of community colleges as organizations can open new ways of understanding how inequitable organizational structures, practices, and routines endure despite well-intentioned people and policies. In this era of racialized justice, we believe community colleges are critical spaces for racialized forms of recognition, healing, and empowerment. In service of that ideal, we argue that a TRO lens can shed light on mechanisms that sustain community colleges as both the most accessible postsecondary pathway for minoritized students and the most chronically underfunded sector of U.S. higher education.

To follow, we provide an overview of TRO and explain the value of studying community colleges as racialized organizations. Afterward, we share three exemplar cases with empirical insights, which help illustrate mechanisms of racial inequity. We close with a synthesis of the affordances of studying community colleges as racialized organizations and implications for research and policy.

## An Overview of the Theory of Racialized Organizations

For those new to the study of racialized organizations, it can be useful to consider Ray's (2019) theory as a cousin to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's (2017) influential *Racism without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, which first advanced the notion of race-evasive ideology<sup>1</sup> and theorized mechanisms by which race-evasion perpetuates racist systems and outcomes. In his organizational contribution to the sociology of race and racial projects, Ray (2019) helps clarify "the way race influences organizational formation, hierarchies, and process" (p. 28). Specifically, he replaces race-evasive notions with the view that organizations—as schemas connecting organizational rules and routines to resources—(re) create racial outcomes by routinizing values associated with racial hierarchies. In doing so, he responds to long-standing invisibilization of (a) race in organizational theory and (b) the role of organizations in race theories.

Ray (2019) posits four tenets—or central mechanisms—that structure racialized organizations. The first tenet is the core definition of racialized organizations as meso-level social structures that limit the personal agency and collective efficacy of oppressed racial groups while magnifying the agency of oppressors. The remaining three tenets describe mechanisms by which racialization is (re)produced via routine organizational forms and functions and, in turn, by which racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups. First, racialized organizations create rules and norms that legitimate unequal resource distribution via differentiation between white and minoritized organizational types. Second, Ray (2019) argues that whiteness acts as an organizational credential; that is, an organization's claim to whiteness ascribes status that legitimates "bureaucratic means of allocating resources by merit" (p. 41). Finally, racialized organizations decouple formal rules from organizational practice such that rules are enforced that benefit whites and whiteness, whereas commitments to racial equity are decoupled from practice. Collectively, these tenets denote the modes of reproduction by which racialized organizations are institutionalized, meaning routinely (re)created over time (McCambly & Colyvas, 2022, 2023). As such, we can analyze the efficacy of attempts at change (i.e., via equity initiatives, campaigns, working groups, and policies)—or racialized change work—based on the extent to which they weaken or replace these modes of reproduction.

Ultimately, TRO is part of a lineage of theories that position race as a mutable social construct that mechanizes oppression and maintains white supremacy (Mills, 2014; Omi & Winant, 2014). Specifically, this theory aptly reminds us that segregation—as a mechanism of white resource hoarding—is maintained and policed at the level of organizational action (e.g., formal or informal restrictions in housing,

schooling, and healthcare). Just like racial categories themselves, racial segregation evolves according to how organizations are positioned to inequitably link communities to resources. For example, as “junior colleges,” community colleges were stratified and stratifying organizations that served a disproportionate number of students from populations with limited postsecondary access for “both the egalitarian promise of the world’s first modern democracy and the constraints of its dynamic capitalist economy” (Brint & Karabel, 1989, p. 6). The expansion of the community college not only reflects a tension between egalitarian promises and capitalist constraints, the sector’s development overlaps with the eras of *de jure* and *de facto* racial segregation. It is not a coincidence that the primary emphasis of community college from a transfer-function mission to a role as suppliers of distinct vocational training aligns with increasing demands for postsecondary access and credentials from historically marginalized populations, particularly people of color (Rhoades & Valadez, 1996). Indeed, a key plot in the story of contemporary community colleges is one of an ebb and flow of organizational mechanisms that overdetermine the types of postsecondary opportunities available to minoritized students. TRO’s tenets, when applied to organizational patterns and outcomes, can thus expose when and how race-evasive policy, norms, or beliefs governing meso-level activities can efficiently and routinely sustain racially inequitable access to resources, power, wellbeing, and safety. In the absence of such a racialized lens, it can be difficult to cut through assumptions that community colleges are inherently democratic and egalitarian.

## Why Study Community Colleges as Racialized Organizations?

The call to study community colleges as racialized organizations is fueled, in part, by a refusal to center the settler colonial gaze<sup>2</sup> that demands proof of either harm to or worthiness of historically marginalized communities. Instead, a racialized organizational lens asks: how are community colleges systematically resourced and structured in ways that (re)produce white supremacy (as both process and outcome), and under what conditions are those processes weakened or replaced via organizational or field-level change?

This paper advances our collective attunement, as community college scholars, to the organizational arrangements that perpetuate and weaken white supremacy. And, critically, we do so recognizing that such processes are not limited to inter-institutional mechanisms (i.e., those occurring *within* the community college). Instead, we require a theoretical lens relevant to how organizations are designed, positioned, funded, and normed as part of a larger ecosystem. For example, how is it that so much of higher education scholarship takes for granted that the institutions serving the greatest proportion of low-income students and students of color are also the most poorly funded by public and private sources alike? In what ways can community colleges serve as unique ladders for economic and sociocultural equity among racially minoritized populations while avoiding recycling traumatizing forms of racialized hypercapitalism?

We leverage Ray’s (2019) TRO to better understand a range of questions, including how policymakers, researchers, and educational leaders justify inequitable circumstances

using metrics that reproduce the status quo. For example, higher education scholars often interpret the lesser funding awarded to community colleges as a function of their limited research enterprise and differentiated mission (e.g., Wellman et al., 2009). Similarly, the field of higher education rarely troubles the assignment of expertise on community colleges to faculty at 4-year colleges and universities (Twombly & Townsend, 2008), most of whom have never taught at or attended a community college. In short, we use a racialized organizational lens to think in new ways about how community colleges, as an institutional type, are often as marginalized as the students they serve. In addition to offering an analytic lens toward critique, studying community colleges as racialized organizations also offers fruitful ground toward deconstructing persistent mechanisms of educational inequity (McCambly & Colyvas, 2023).

To follow, we offer analytic exemplars ranging from studying community colleges as racialized policy beneficiaries to studying neoliberal demands on community colleges as racialized drivers. Through these exemplars, we demonstrate how the application of Ray's (2019) theory offers up new, critical tools, and perspectives for understanding racial minoritization as a social process. We then close the paper with a future-facing vision for the practice and transformation made possible when, as researchers and practitioners, we take on racial inequity as an embedded organizational feature.

## **Exemplar I: How Racialization Situates Community Colleges as Policy Beneficiaries**

From both state coffers and private philanthropy, community colleges, and minority-serving institutions (MSIs) alike are systematically under-resourced in terms of dollars and self-determination compared to predominantly white organizations (Gasman et al., 2008; Harris, 2021; Miller & Morphew, 2017). Racialization is enabled, in part, by the differentiation between white and minoritized organizational types. "While white organizational types are seen as normative and neutral, non-white organizations are. . .often stigmatized" (Ray, 2019, p. 38) in ways that legitimize the unequal funding of community colleges. While not all community colleges are MSIs, they are nonetheless racialized in that they are broadly associated with service to minoritized students and, as an organizational type, community colleges have the greatest concentration of minority-serving designees. Instances of federal and private grantmaking—frequent drivers of educational policy change and reform (Scott & Jabbar, 2014)—demonstrate how the racialization of community colleges creates conditions that constrain both resources and political support for equitable educational futures in these spaces. From this perspective, TRO helps conceptualize and study community colleges as a group of racialized policy beneficiaries (McCambly & Colyvas, 2022).

Recent studies on the role of grantmakers in the racialized arrangement of institutions of higher education have demonstrated that community colleges, and in particular minority-serving community colleges, are routinely underfunded or funded under circumstances of enhanced surveillance and limited self-determination compared to

their research-university counterparts (see, e.g., Bell & Gándara, 2021; Gándara & Rutherford, 2020; McCambly & Colyvas, 2022; McCambly et al., 2022; Miller & Morphew, 2017). Taking a longitudinal view, when funders—the state or otherwise—prioritize racial equity in their policy paradigms, there are often changes in funding streams that challenge the status quo. For example, in one study, a racial equity paradigm increased grant funding to MSIs broadly but diminished funding for community colleges, especially minority-serving community colleges (McCambly & Colyvas, 2022). Similarly, multiple studies of performance-based funding demonstrate that these policies, even when designed to improve equitable outcomes, rarely favor equity, community colleges, or community college students (Gándara & Daenekindt, 2022; Gándara & Rutherford, 2020; McCambly & Haley, 2014; Ortagus et al., 2020).

We can better understand these counterintuitive outcomes, often categorized as unintended consequences, from a racialized organizational lens. As policy beneficiaries, organizations with high racially minoritized student populations—in this case community colleges—are routinely positioned as less deserving or lower-priority than institutions racialized as white-serving (Garcia, 2019). As such, when equity-focused changes occur, community colleges are frequently paired with more restrictive policy designs. Restrictive policy designs, often applied to community colleges, can come in the form of narrow foci on developmental or workforce education rather than broader categories of learning and pedagogy used under race-evasive frames (Ching et al., 2020; Felix & Trinidad, 2020; Lester, 2014). Similarly, policies targeting minoritized beneficiaries often feature high levels of expensive surveillance and accountability in the form of randomized control trial evaluations, elaborate application requirements, frequent reporting, and metrics weighted in favor of white organizational privileges (Gándara et al., 2023; McCambly & Mulroy, 2022; Ray et al., 2020). In other instances, funders entrust white-led intermediaries to improve community colleges rather than community college leaders or Black, Indigenous, or People of Color-led organizations with first-hand knowledge of and investment in said communities (Felix, 2021; McCambly, 2021).

As racialized policy beneficiaries, community colleges not only walk away with fewer resources than four-year-plus institutions, but also a more limited scope in terms of their social role, which casts doubt on their social value. For example, practically all major top-down community college reform movements—especially those focused on students of color—over the last two decades have focused on workforce returns or narrowing student pathways to and through community college. While these theories of action offer valuable insights for organizational change, their rigid foci run the risk of reducing the student experience at community colleges. In doing so, reformers risk “systematically (re)creat[ing] settler colonial hierarchies and the racialized connotation that relegates” (McCambly & Colyvas, 2022, p. 100) MSIs and community colleges to a “lesser” organizational category. Moreover, policies that put a premium on metrics privileging white institutions (e.g., research capacity/productivity and traditional completion rates) create new mechanisms for rewarding whiteness within a field of racialized organizations. Under these conditions, research-intensive and relatively selective MSIs—a growing segment of institutions (Santiago et al., 2020)—may be



more able to benefit from funding agencies' tides of interest in equity. By contrast, community colleges as a broadly racialized category, and minority-serving community colleges in particular, are multiply marginalized as organizations possessing the least claim to whiteness.

A racialized analytic approach to understanding community colleges as policy beneficiaries sheds light on the effectiveness of policy projects intended to weaken racialization. Weakening racialization is a longitudinal process only effective if modes of racialization like race-evasive or white-focused policy frames are eroded *and* if new modes of racialization are not simultaneously created via, for example, inequitable policy burdens. In the context of research on community colleges as multiply marginalized policy beneficiaries, the racialized organizational framework opens up analysis on: (a) whether and how organizational routines that maintain the racialized distribution of resources and agency are weakened or left intact by equity projects within community college policy; and (b) how equity projects, as implementation processes, can (un)intentionally create new mechanisms of racialized inequity even as they diminish old ones.

Work in this vein holds the promise for the design of equity work in and around community colleges that resists the symbolic and constraining tendencies of racial change projects in U.S. higher education. Instead, analyzing community colleges as racialized policy beneficiaries can help further eschew the discussion of student-focused “gaps” and move on to the organizational processes that create educational debts<sup>3</sup> (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

## **Exemplar 2: Racialization of HSIs and Impact on Hispanic-Serving Community Colleges**

Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are U.S. public and private colleges and universities that (a) enroll at least 25% Latina/o/x and 50% Pell-eligible undergraduate students, and (b) operate with low core expenses (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008). With such legislative criteria, the HSI population is institutionally diverse, comprised of community colleges, small private colleges, comprehensive regional universities, and large research-intensive universities (Excelencia in Education, 2022)—postsecondary institutions with markedly distinct funding levels per student (Community College Research Center, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Illustrative of this compositional diversity, Morton College, a small public Hispanic-serving community college in Illinois with an 82% Latinx-identified student body, and the University of California-Irvine, a large research institution with a 25% Latinx-identified student enrollment, are both HSIs (Excelencia in Education, 2022).

Despite this heterogeneity, each HSI is also a racialized organization (Garcia, 2019; Ray, 2019; Vargas, 2018). Given their unequal funding relative to historically white institutions, these organizations pursue, and to varying degrees depend on, racialized funding, specifically Title V grants (Aguilar-Smith, 2021a). Part of the Higher Education Act, the Title V Program is a competitive federal grant providing capacity-building institutional awards to HSIs. Notably, the creation of Title V did not result in federal funding

for *all* HSIs, despite these organizations generally being identified and understood as chronically underfunded. Instead, Title V segregates resources via a meritocratic competition among an increasingly unlike set of actors—colleges and universities with vastly different organizational conditions and needs (Aguilar-Smith, 2022). The Title V grant competition, on its face, presents as equitable, inviting all HSIs to compete in a supposedly impartial competition. However, this arrangement can legitimize and uphold racism and white dominant standards of merit, rewarding colleges and universities with specific resources and skills, namely ones that know how—and can—navigate white dominant standards (i.e., indicators of prestige, effectiveness, and capacity grounded in whiteness; Garcia, 2019). For instance, HSI leaders have proposed that the Title V Program (or the Department of Education, more specifically) rewards, at least implicitly, institutions with proven track records, ones with the knowledge and expertise in developing large-scale budgets and managing multimillion-dollar grants (Aguilar-Smith, 2021b, 2022). Such “surefire wins,” as Aguilar-Smith (2021b) put it, fall into the racialized schema of what looks “deserving” or like a “safe investment” (p. 202).

But what constitutes a “safe investment”? Categorizing some investments as safe and others as risky is a concerning practice with deeply raced implications within the context of public programs expressly designed, at least in part, to remediate or remedy historical harm, such as Title V. Worse yet, this is not an unusual framing. Rather, this cognitive frame around risk pervades grantmaking to U.S. higher education (McCambly et al., 2022) as well as conversations related to HSIs. Take, for example, the recent opinion piece that put forward the idea of “super HSIs” (Wilcox, 2022), essentially describing “super” as those approximating whiteness. And so, as Garcia (2019) astutely theorized in her debut text, *Becoming Hispanic-Serving Institutions: Opportunities for Colleges & Universities*, even within the context of HSIs, whiteness serves as an organizing logic and credential, which disserves colleges unable—or unwilling—to conform to white dominant standards. Indeed, research has demonstrated that a subset of HSIs may be less able to competitively pursue Title V funding. Specifically, with structural barriers (i.e., their minimal grant writing staff and expertise), pronounced financial limitations, and constrained campus connections, unsuccessful Title V applicants<sup>4</sup> demonstrate the bounded circle of agency (Aguilar-Smith, 2022), as these conditions limit these organizations’ ability to meet this grant competition’s underlying white-centered standards and, in turn, secure this often much-needed funding. Ultimately, this competitive, meritocratic arrangement may lead to an inequitable distribution of resources among HSIs. Importantly, given the marked variation in HSIs’ historical and present financial circumstances (Núñez et al., 2016), these resources may be comparatively far more beneficial or needed at some HSIs than others. Specifically, this money may go a long way in supporting the crucial work Hispanic-serving community colleges do, often with unjustly constrained resources. Even more, this pervasive competitive funding logic across U.S. higher education supports neoliberal politics rather than moves toward liberation. For instance, this logic serves to undermine collaborative possibilities among HSIs, including among Hispanic-serving community colleges and between Hispanic-serving community colleges and their 4-year counterparts.



Mindful of the marked (and increasing) diversity of the HSI population and, thus, the potential differential benefit of Title V funds and other grant funding, it bears drawing attention to HSIs' sectoral differences and implications of these differences once again. Hispanic-serving community colleges are both disadvantaged by the unequal distribution of financial resources to (a) community colleges relative to 4-year institutions (Community College Research Center, 2022) and (b) HSIs relative to historically white institutions (Nellum & Valle, 2015; Ortega, 2015). Hence, Hispanic-serving community colleges are, in the aggregate, perversely affected in dual ways, or multiply marginalized, within the existing architecture of U.S. higher education in general and within the competitive grant landscape more specifically. The net effect is cruelly ironic: Hispanic-serving community colleges—institutions generally in acute need of additional resources—are often those most malpositioned to secure external funding. In other words, their resource limitations simultaneously limit the competitiveness for funding.

Ultimately, the competitive grant landscape, especially given its meritocratic underpinnings, limits and grants access to material and social resources. As critical scholars, it is imperative to recognize how race and racism shape grant obtainment in unjust ways. Relatedly, as Ray (2019) makes clear, while state and individual animus play a role in racialization and racism, organizations also contribute to the production of racial ideologies and the social construction of race. As meso-level racial structures, organizations serve as the “primary terrain of racial contestation” (Ray, 2019, p. 30). Accordingly, in line with Ray (2019), we can understand HSIs as racialized organizations that, in participating in this competitive process, (in)advertently participate in the raced distribution of public resources.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, as organizations, as Ray (2019) explains, HSIs can help launder racial domination by not calling out how this arrangement is unequal, or at least predisposed to (re)produce inequality among HSIs. Toward advancing equity and justice among HSIs, it is essential to first recognize how the Title V Program (which can be understood as a well-intended equity project) along with other equity-aspiring grant opportunities may implicitly reify racially patterned inequity. And, as scholars, we should be considering—quite intentionally—how we may advocate for more just arrangements rather than simplistic “throw (limited) money at them” solutions.

### **Exemplar 3: The Interplay of Racialization and Neoliberalism in Community Colleges**

One challenge of diversity, equity, and inclusion work in community colleges is that the racial order can be hidden under broader mechanisms of neoliberalism. In other words, common neoliberal concepts, classifications, and measures often reflect unequal resource distribution and power dynamics among different racial and ethnic groups. By definition, the neoliberal perspective uses market pressure to push public colleges to increase revenue, improve quality, and cut costs (Cannella & Koro-Ljungberg, 2017). Since the 1990s, the neoliberal assumptions started to heavily steer the direction of higher education (Mintz, 2021). In today's higher education context,

neoliberalism is prevalent in community college initiatives and policies (Ayers, 2005; Boyd, 2011; Bylsma, 2015; Dougherty & Natow, 2020; Levin, 2017), and neoliberal policies and practices can further marginalize student groups (Cox & Sallee, 2018; Isserles, 2021). To compensate for insufficient public investment, community colleges are forced to set forth high labor expectations for faculty members and heavily rely on adjunct faculty as a cost-saving strategy (Gonzales & Ayers, 2018; Levin, 2007a). The tendency to treat students as consumers jeopardizes postsecondary education's commitment to supporting students' authentic growth (Mintz, 2021), simplifying the goal of community college education: Get students in, get them out, fast and at low cost. Neoliberalism also threatens shared governance in that administrative leaders focus on minimizing faculty resistance rather than truly listening to and addressing their concerns (Isserles, 2021; Kater, 2017).

The demands of contemporary neoliberal definitions of student success create normative and political pressures on underfunded community colleges to follow accepted (and often grant-funded) best practices to increase completion and maximize their return on investments (Gulea, 2016; Rhoads et al., 2009). In comparison, high-resource institutions focus on creating exploratory college experiences, allowing their students to find their own pace and develop social capital (e.g., Michelman et al., 2022). While the field of higher education calls for #stopCCstigma, ironically, neoliberalism shapes community colleges to offer a different type of postsecondary education to their students.

Because racism is often legitimized and hidden behind race-evasive measures featuring "meritocracy" defined by the dominant group (Ray, 2019, p. 29), neoliberal policies, practices, and procedures and their assumptions should be interrogated. Through the lens of racialized organizations, we ask: Who controls and (re)distributes resources? How are resources distributed? What is the mechanism of resource (re) distribution? Who wins and who loses? In the interplay of racialized organizations and neoliberalism, it is possible that racism is reinforced in the process of resource (re) distribution, which unfairly justifies neoliberalism based on meritocracy, thus creating a vicious cycle for community colleges. That is, because the dominant racial group arbitrarily defines resource (re)distribution criteria that favor themselves, racially minoritized individuals, and organizations are rendered underperformers and thus kept from resources and power. Specifically, the term *resource* captures financial assets and policymaking and narratives, as well as the social power to define what resource means in the given context. Resource (re)distribution plays a key role in the connection between racism and neoliberalism.

Considering financial assets as a form of resources, the national move toward performance-based funding (PBF) is a classic example of how state governments control and inequitably (re)distribute state appropriations among community colleges. While state appropriations are tied to measures of institutional performance, it is not unusual for influential policymakers and interest groups to design specific PBF metrics and thus steer resource distribution (Ness et al., 2015; Tandberg, 2010). Research has also consistently shown that PBF adoption does not contribute to degree production, except for short-term certificates, and can disadvantage minority-serving community colleges as they serve a greater proportion of racially minoritized students (Jones et al., 2017;

Li et al., 2018; Ortagus et al., 2020). Minority-serving community colleges, disadvantaged in meeting institutional performance measures, do not financially benefit as much as their high-resource, whiter counterparts from state appropriations. These colleges can be further penalized with limited financial capacities to provide meaningful college experiences and improve academic outcomes for students. Future research can identify equity-based measures (e.g., antiracism plans and the *servingsness* of racially minoritized students) in funding models and their effect on institutional revenues and expenditures.

Another example of racism under the cover of neoliberalism is access to student success interventions. In this case, *resource* is defined in the form of academic, financial, social, and cultural support. With the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF), many community colleges were able to respond to student needs and offer emergency grants (Taylor & Melidona, 2021). Most funding for community colleges has been distributed based on financial need, regardless of students' academic performance and probability of graduation. The use of pure need-based eligibility criteria is critical for racially minoritized students because their academic performance is substantially influenced by structural inequities among racial and ethnic groups (Sólorzano et al., 2005; Stevens et al., 2018). The neoliberal assumptions of intervention design using meritocracy (e.g., college readiness and standardized test scores) can limit racially minoritized students' access to resources, and it is the responsibility of community college leaders and practitioners to ensure access to student success interventions is equitably (re)distributed. While community college students managed to be in class despite the double pandemic of COVID and racism (Starks, 2021), community college leaders and practitioners are obligated to terminate exclusionary practices that reinforce the current racial order.

The last example pertains to how resources are (re)distributed as narratives via the interpretation of data. Upon the call for accountability and evidence-based decision-making, data-driven decisions usually emphasize quantitative evidence while overlooking qualitative data on student experiences (Hora et al., 2017). Imagine an annual report published by a college or a state board of higher education—figures and plots depict students' academic performance with lines representing the socially constructed concepts of race and ethnicity. It is common to see a line representing Asian students, despite the term often clumping Asian American students with international students from Asian countries who hold different cultural and social identities (Yeo et al., 2019). The lines representing Latinx and Black students are often at the lower end of academic performance in all the plots, which continue to tell the story of power and oppression in U.S. society. The lines representing students who identify as American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and Indigenous Pacific Islanders are either missing or consolidated into the "other" category due to their lower numeric representation, reflecting their invisibility on college campuses (Byon & Roberson, 2020; Faircloth et al., 2015). When the presentation and interpretation of data tell a disempowering story for racially minoritized students, the decisions based on this narrative are more likely to normalize injustice and reproduce the status quo. To provide meaningful support for racially minoritized students, community colleges need to be

mindful of the disjoint between real student experiences and data reporting and shift the narrative from a deficit lens to support the growth of individuals and community colleges (Sullivan, 2017).

Under neoliberalism, student success is defined narrowly as credential completion, where funding is appropriated based on performance measures, and data is reported to reinforce racial inequity. The multi-faceted neoliberal concepts, policies, and practices collectively penalize students in need of more support navigating college. The ideology of neoliberalism and social justice will continue to play out in the realm of higher education (Levin, 2007b), posing challenges and opportunities for community college leaders and practitioners to learn, unlearn, and relearn to become more equity-minded.

## **Discussion: Racialized Organizations and Community College Equity Efforts**

As critical scholars, we are committed to exploring, identifying, and rooting out racialization in and outside of community colleges that sustains and perpetuates racial inequity. In our individual scholarship, each of us directs attention to policies and practices that influence community colleges and explore if and how these efforts lead toward more equitable institutions. Collectively, we took on the challenge of building on our research and applying Ray's (2019) Theory of Racialized Organizations (TRO) to the community college context to unearth racialization processes spanning macro-, meso-, and micro-social levels that keep racial inequity in place. Highlighted in our work are taken-for-granted assumptions of organizational neutrality within community college research that minimize the field's analytic ability to understand the racialization embedded within institutions of higher education and how they maintain, if not exacerbate, the racial disparities equity advocates actively try to disrupt. Focused on interrogating mechanisms of racial inequity, we provided three exemplars that offer new perspectives, insights, and analytic tools to understand how race-evasive and white-centered approaches to grantmaking, allocating resources, and credentialing reify racial stratification and maintain structures of inequity within community colleges.

Our first exemplar illuminates how racialization is imbued in federal and private grantmaking in ways that restrict access, dilute benefits, and place beyond reach critical resources needed by community colleges. Seen at the margins of the higher education social order, community colleges are stigmatized for being sites of opportunity for the most vulnerable and are excluded from being policy beneficiaries given their concentration of racially-minoritized students. Using Ray's (2019) work, our first case demonstrates how community colleges as minoritized organizations are delegitimized in government and private grantmaking and subject to a racial stratification that produces unequal resource allocation. If community colleges are awarded grant dollars, they tend to include more surveillance in the way of expenditure restrictions and reporting mechanisms. This initial example calls us to recognize how race and racism shape funding strategies and the ways that community colleges are "multiply marginalized policy beneficiaries" that are socially positioned as less than, which limits their ability to acquire and benefit from opportunities that can weaken racialization.

Focused on racialization, we uncover how racial inequity is reified when community colleges are seen as “less-than organizations” within higher education which limits their ability to acquire and benefit from funding opportunities. This is explicitly the case in our second exemplar, where we discuss how Title V policy relies on standards of merit that can exclude Hispanic-serving community colleges from accessing federal funds to improve educational outcomes. Community colleges are the *de facto* MSI, yet when funds are created for institutions with large populations of minoritized students, federal grants are unequally distributed to community colleges. Our second exemplar makes the case that the meritocratic design of the Title V grant competition maintains racialization by opening the possibility of over-awarding research-oriented institutions, thereby hindering the opportunity for community colleges to benefit from these racialized federal grant dollars. We are reminded that decades of underfunding two-year institutions hampered their ability to develop grant proposals, given the lack of resources to build their grant-seeking (and grant management) capacity and infrastructure. In this way, the second exemplar serves as a reminder to scrutinize well-intended policies just as much as ones that overtly seek to harm. How can Hispanic-serving community colleges benefit from “capacity-building institutional awards” when they are forced to compete with research-oriented institutions that are seen as “safe investments” and good stewards of federal resources? As Title V is currently structured, the institutions that stand to benefit the most from this opportunity may very well be the least likely to receive this resource. Using a TRO lens, we call out the underlying ideologies and values centering white standards of merit, deservingness, and competition, which severely restrict community colleges from accessing federal resources that can support their expanded mission and range of students.

Our final exemplar shares how racialization and neoliberalism work together to justify underfunding community colleges, overexerting individuals with increased labor expectations, and increasing credential attainment as an economic benefit rather than personal good. In this section, we argue that community colleges are in a “vicious cycle;” lacking the power to shape the (re)distribution of resources, they are socially constructed as underperforming organizations that do not merit additional resources or power. We problematize the emergence and expansion of performance-based funding as a source of racial stratification that harms MSIs by restricting access to resources based on neoliberal, white-centered performance metrics. Ultimately, we recognize that what influences the ability of community colleges to equitably achieve their mission and serve students is crafted by macro-level mechanisms rooted in whiteness that actively deny resources to minoritized organizations.

## Implications

In conversation, we applied Ray’s (2019) Theory of Racialized Organizations (TRO) to our scholarship and offered paths forward to understand why many lauded efforts to advance equity, justice, and inclusion are delayed, derailed, or diluted within community colleges. Taking up TRO, we acknowledge that organizations are not race-neutral and that their histories, identities, cultures, and structures all contribute to conditions and

processes that are at times antithetical to notions of racial justice and community colleges' democratic and egalitarian ethos. Focusing on racialized organizations, scholarly colleagues document the ways educational policies, grantmaking processes, allocation strategies, and calls for increased completion are all imbued by racialization that maintains inequities and diminishes the ability of community colleges to build their capacity to equitably serve students. The exemplars in this paper move us from a scholarship of struggle to one of promise that allows us to interrogate community colleges as organizations imbued with racial meaning from their founding. In doing so, we open new possibilities for enacting racialized change work that undermines inequity embedded in policies, funding opportunities, routines, and educators' cognitive frames (McCambly & Colyvas 2022).

For each of us, albeit in varying ways and moments, Ray's (2019) theory speaks to something we had long recognized based on our own praxis: racial inequities in higher education are produced in/by organizations, not individual acts of bias. However, TRO should not be viewed as a framework attuned to praxis by itself. That work is in our hands. In varied settings and levels of the community college—from funding policies to internal curricular and advising policy implementation—all of us have sought to stand in the tension of simultaneously critiquing inequitable systems, while also using scholarship to consider new and better possibilities for practice. How do we build greater futures, for instance, when our research repeatedly surfaces how well-intentioned, race-conscious, equity-oriented individuals can give their time, energy, and effort to dismantle racialized organizational barriers, only to see their efforts delayed, diluted, or derailed? Like Sisyphus from Greek mythology, equity advocates wake up each morning, head to campus, and push the boulder up the hill toward more racially-just institutions, just to have it roll back down. Rather than focus on the individual and the practices developed to instigate change, TRO helps empirically pinpoint long-standing organizational routines, processes, and structures that diminish agency, legitimize unequal distribution of resources, and ultimately unveil the root-causes of inequities experienced in community colleges.

To view community colleges as racialized organizations also aligns contemporary institutional patterns with a consistent contextual condition in U.S. society—racialized ideology. Indeed, we are reminded that community colleges were established and developed during the 20th century—a period during which W.E.B. Du Bois prophetically stated society would wrestle with “how far differences of race will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to their utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization” (as cited in Appiah, 2013, p. 1). Despite progress, contemporary expansion of racialized inequalities reminds all of us that Du Bois' question lingers well into the 21st century. As such, we recognize that to fulfill the promise of community colleges as a truly egalitarian post-secondary pathway, we must identify, center, and deconstruct racialized structures that impede us from our most lofty ambitions.

As we close, it is critical for us to position TRO as a tool to help uncover the racialization processes embedded in organizations. Equipped with this tool, we can get closer to mechanisms of inequity influencing community colleges and use TRO to (re)



examine how our research endeavors, policymaking processes, and practices maintain or weaken racialization. Take, for example, the implementation of the Guided Pathways Framework and the ways this race-evasive reform effort has failed to account for the racial stratification of community colleges within the social order of higher education as well as the ways that any recommended shift in organizational structures and practices that do not weaken, or at a minimum identify, modes of reproduction only maintain the racialized status quo (McCambly & Colyvas, 2022; Ray, 2019). Building from our exemplars, future research must look beyond individual initiatives and action and place a deeper focus on structural issues that maintain inequitable conditions we seek to eradicate. In particular, future research should consider how institutions restrict racial equity advocates from instigating change (Felix et al., 2022), how symbolic reforms of racial justice are devoid of material resources (McCoy-Simmons et al., 2022), and how goals of improving completion seek to benefit neoliberal aims grounded in whiteness.

As for policymaking, leaders must recognize the historic and contemporary unequal distribution of resources permeating state budgets, grantmaking opportunities, and formulas that decide funding allocations. Our exemplars demonstrate that even well-intended policies minimally benefit community colleges compared to other organizations in higher education. Applying tenets of racialized organizations, existing laws, funding formulas, field-level norms, and educational codes requires reformulation that acknowledges and acts on the racial inequity institutionalized by past decisions and reforms. Now that we have provided a scholarly understanding of the matrix and know the underlying processes and structures that keep us from ameliorating racial inequity, we must place attention on what maintains racialization within organizations. In our policy development and practices, we cannot tear down old structures only to maintain white-centered ideologies in what we build in their place. If racialized organizations seek to diminish the agency of minoritized individuals, then our response is to push for solidarity work, where community college leaders turn individual commitments into collective action that disrupt the everyday functioning of organizations. Our article serves as an opportunity for us—as researchers, policymakers, and practitioners alike—to collectively reject analyses and solutions that treat organizations as race neutral. Instead, we write this piece as an invitation to use our research and practice to undermine and weaken the unique forms of racialization common to the community college setting. We invite you to dream and enact more racially equitable futures for community college students, faculty, and staff.

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## Notes

1. Bonilla-Silva used the term “color-blind racism;” however we take up Annamma et al.’s (2017) recommendation to use anti-ableist language instead.
2. By “settler colonial gaze” we evoke scholarly understandings of institutions of higher education as outposts or ongoing mechanisms of settler colonialism. Settler-colonial institutions confer humanity on some and demand assimilation to whiteness from others via myths of neutrality and meritocracy (Patel, 2015).
3. In her 2006 AERA address, Gloria Ladson-Billings challenged educational researchers to flip the scope of their work by reframing the individual-focused lens on “achievement gaps” on to the systems-focused “educational debts.” In doing so, Ladson-Billings called on education researchers to focus not only on gaps but on the systemic and multiply embedded mechanisms that have and continue to produce educational debts.
4. For the purposes of this discussion, unsuccessful applicants refers to HSIs that have persistently pursued Title V funding over the years without success. See Aguilar-Smith (2021b) for further explanation of the criteria used to define this category of institutions.
5. In making this claim, we also recognize that many HSIs are in financially precarious positions and, thus, in sincere need of external funding, such as Title V grants.

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