Moving Past a Check-Box Mentality:

Building a Leadership Blueprint for Racial Equity for Adult Credentials

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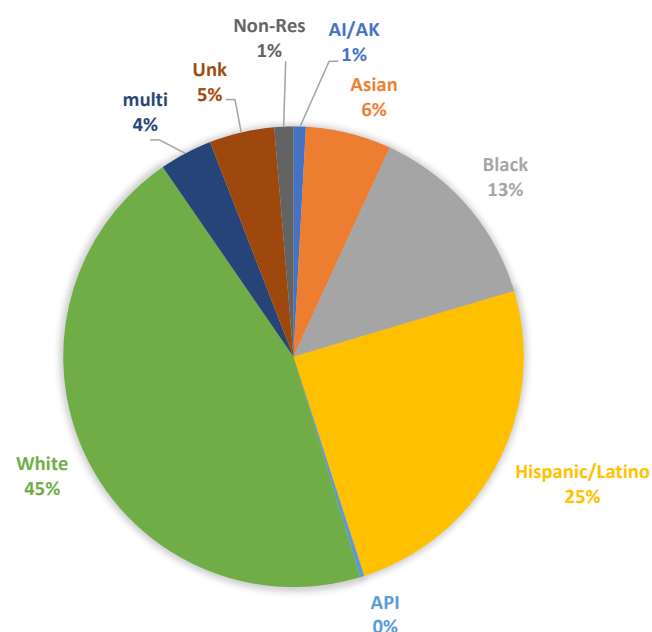Equity Champion Consultant
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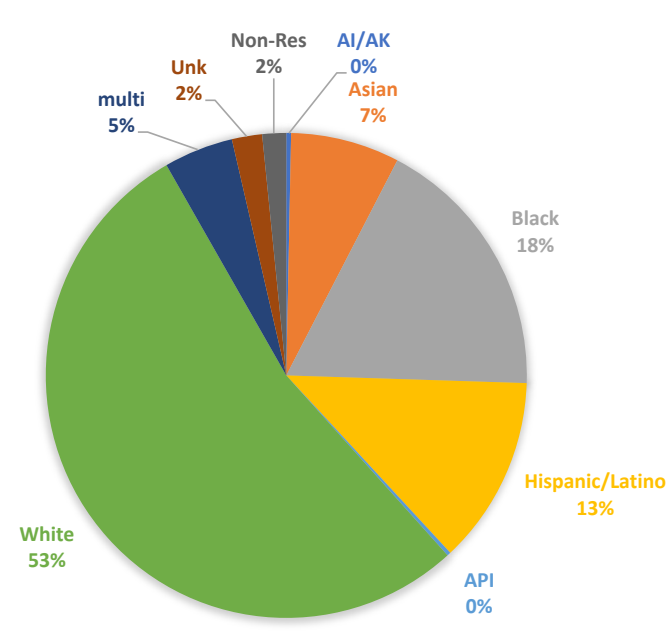*To read the Executive Summary of the study, visit* here

A focus on racial equity is often equated to diverse representation in community colleges. Diversity is indeed an essential element on campus to help students learn (Hurtado et al., 2003), bring critical race theory into adult education (Closson, 2010), and fulfill the open-access mission of community colleges (Malcom, 2013). Diverse representation in leadership and in faculty teaching in classrooms that represents the diversity of student bodies serves as a symbolic signal to racial minorities that there is someone like them on campus (Cross & Carman, 2021; Morgenroth et al., 2015). Yet, diversity and representation can lead to a check-box mentality—"hire diverse candidates—check!", and while a helpful start, this approach can fall short of taking substantial actions and creating an inclusive culture on campus (Howson, 2021). Building racial equity requires more than diverse hires—it takes structural change.

What do the numbers say? Looking at the data on student enrollments in the nation's community colleges (Figure 1) and in Virginia (Figure 2) showcases that even when using a check-box approach to increase representation, there is still room for growth. As the figures below show, the student body in community colleges is diverse (55% students of color in U.S. community colleges: 47% in Virginia's community colleges). Adult learners represent about 1 out of every 3 community college students, thus a focus on andragogy becomes important in classroom instruction to support student success (Loeng, 2018). Touted to increasing equity due to having the most diverse student enrollment of all types of colleges and universities, community colleges still lag in representation in the faculty and leader ranks. Faculty members (see Figures 3 and 4) and leaders of community colleges (see Figure 5) do not represent the students attending their colleges.

Given that a diverse faculty rank helps improve student success in community colleges (Cross & Carman, 2021) there is cause for concern as 3 of 4 full-time faculty members in the nation's community colleges are white and 4 of 5 are white in Virginia. The Virginia Community College System (VCCS) recognized the importance of diversifying its faculty ranks, and a Task Force on Diversity was created in 2013 and provided several recommendations to advance diversity efforts (Munday et al., 2019).

Figure 3
US Community College Faculty by Race/ Ethnicity 2019-2020
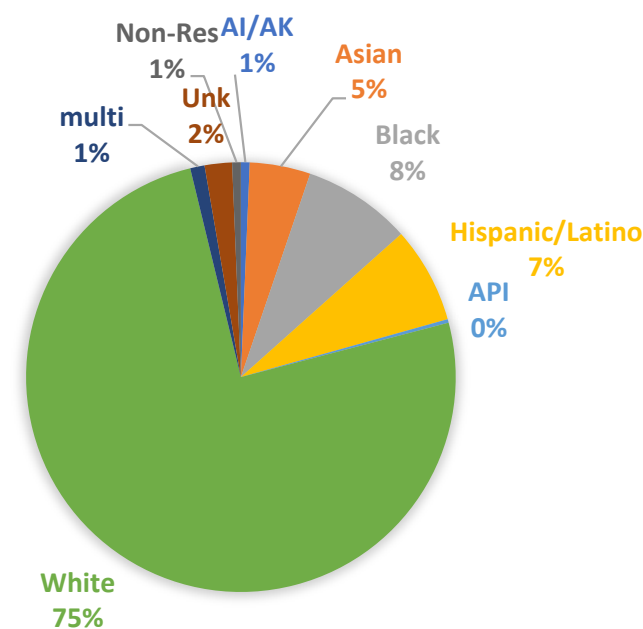
Figure 4
Virginia Community College Faculty by Race/ Ethnicity 2019-2020
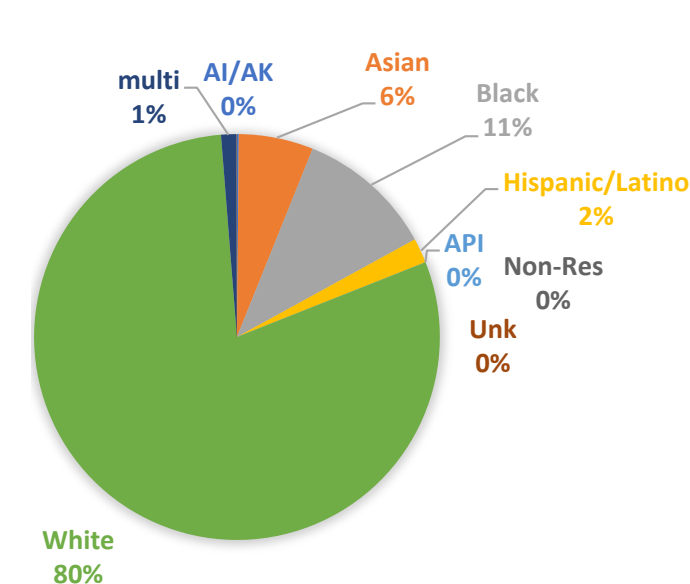
A look at community college leaders reveals a vast majority are white (80%) and are men (66%) (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Despite this overall composition, these data represent progress in the sector as presidents of color historically were stuck for 20 plus years at 13% of college presidents-- thus some progress has occurred, and more needs to happen to reach parity of leaders who look like the students enrolled in community colleges.

Figure 5
Community College President Representation 2017

Figure 1
*U.S. Community College Student Enrollments 2019-2020*

Figure 2
Virginia Community College System Student Enrollments 2019-2020
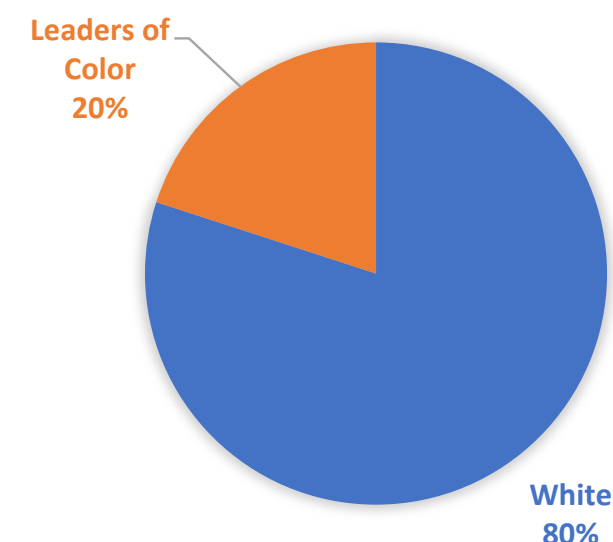
Community college leaders and policy makers need to look under the hood of operations on campus to recognize the ways in which colleges are racialized organizations (Ray, 2019), and how colleges use of race-neutral practices can lead to lack of clarity and inaction (Glasener et al., 2019). Furthermore, there needs to be governance systems and practices put into place that ensure institutional structures and systems become equity-centered (Rall et al., 2020). More equitable campuses can only be achieved through the partnership of various leaders and campus stakeholders (Morgenroth et al., 2022). The ability to do this challenging work requires leadership development, state policies that support (and require attention to) equity on campus, and deep organizational change. This brief presents strategies for leaders to build a culture of equity that embraces and supports racial equity for adult learners on campus.

Leadership Views on Social Justice and Equity

A recent national survey of mid-level and senior-level community college leaders focused on leader perspectives of social justice and equity efforts on their campuses (Eddy et al., 2022). Women and leaders of color were less likely to describe their colleges as equitable (see Figure 6).

Figure 6
Leader Perceptions of Degree to which their college is Equitable: Gender and Race/Ethnicity
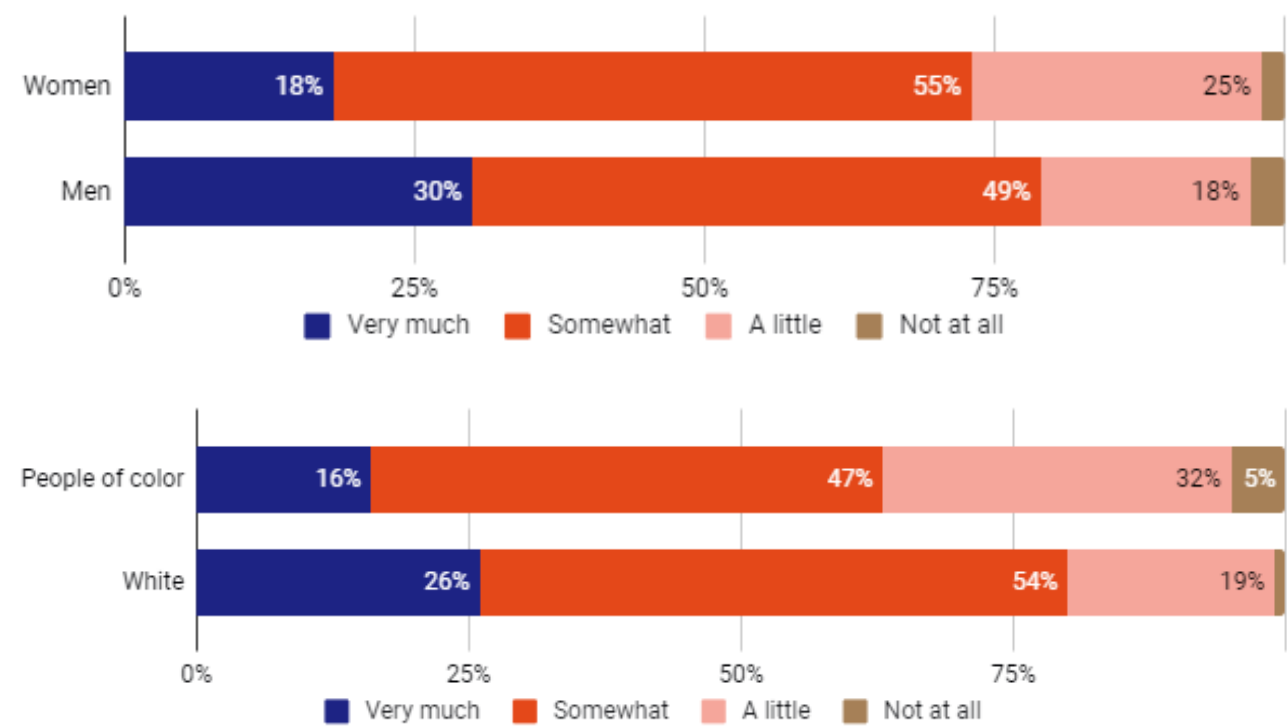
These differences in experience highlight how the campus culture is not experienced in the same ways based on gender and race/ethnicity. The ability to engage in dialogue around issues of social justice and equity also differed by position, gender, and race/ethnicity. Presidents were more likely to describe their colleges as supplying a safe space for dialogue and to describe senior leaders as regularly engaging in honest, authentic dialogue (see Figure 7). Further, leaders of color were less likely than white leaders to describe their colleges as supplying safe spaces for dialogue and women were less likely than men to describe senior leaders as regularly engaging in honest, authentic dialogue (see Figure 8).

Figure 7
Dialogue on Campus: Differences by position
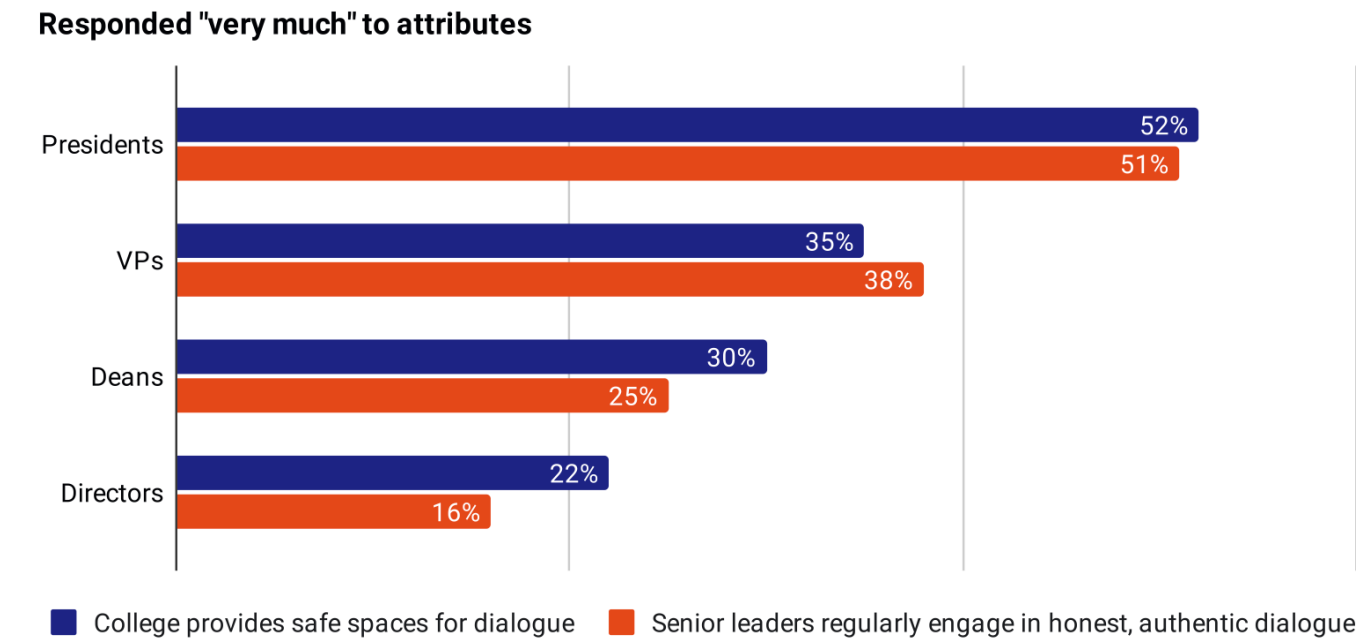
Figure 8
Dialogue Comparisons
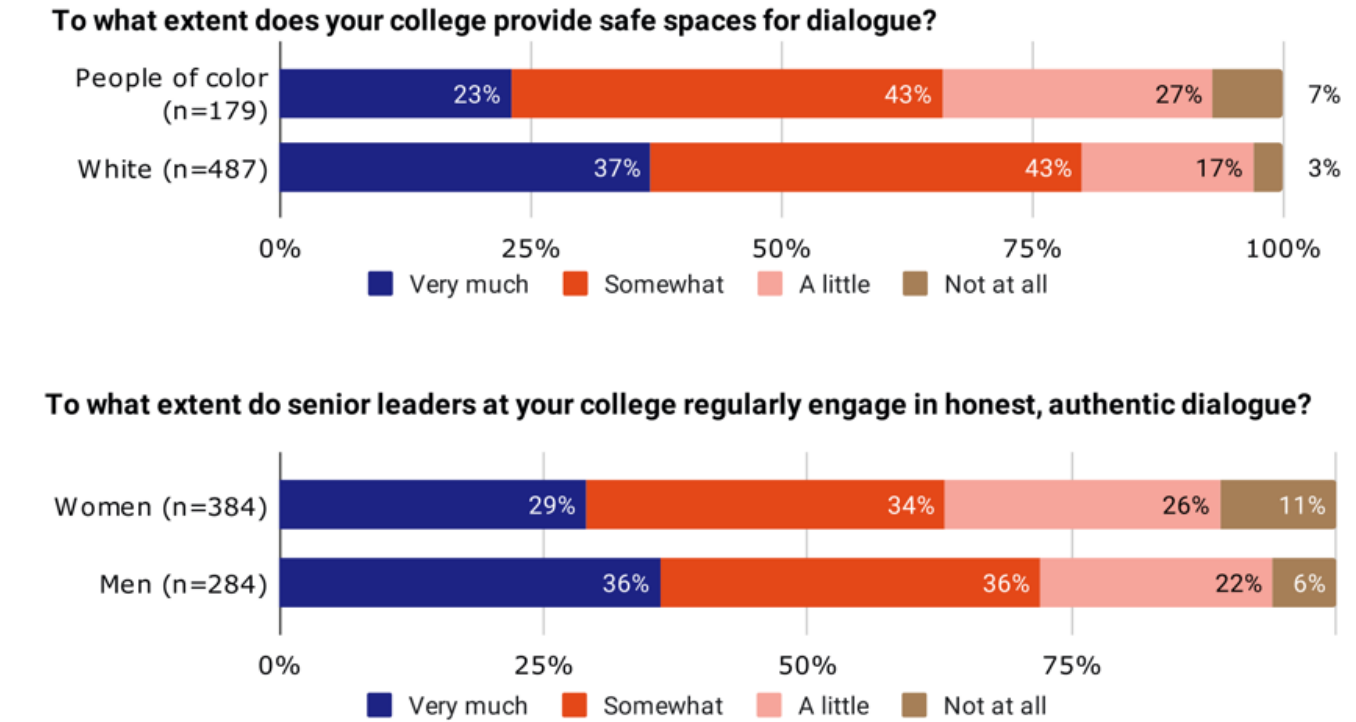
Changing organizations to become more inclusive begins with identifying the ways in which social justice and equity are central to the mission of community colleges to then taking steps to codify these aspirations in plans and the strategic planning process. Many leaders surveyed perceived that these visible documents of the college signaled a commitment to these efforts (see Figure 9).

Figure 9
Reflection of Social Justice and Equity in the Mission and Strategic Plans

Leader perceptions of equity and social justice in mission and strategic plan (n=740)

Does your college have a formal diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) plan? (n=740)

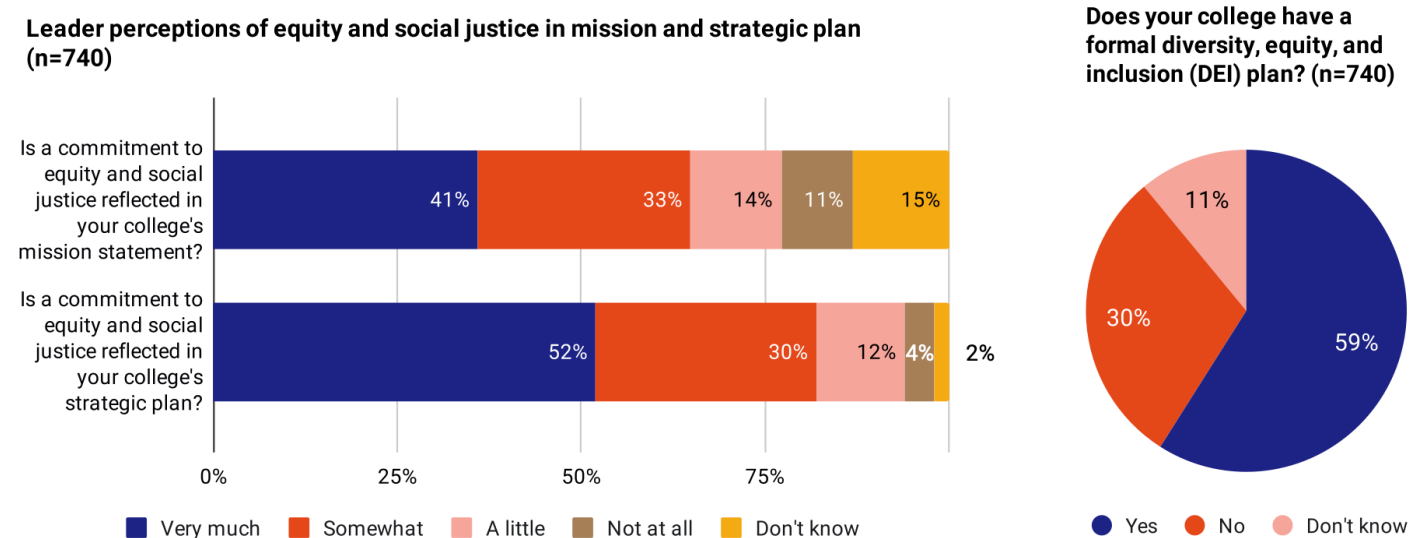In looking at regional differences, only 50% of leaders in the south indicated their college had a formal diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) plan, with 18% unsure if a plan existed. Leaders in the mid-Atlantic (70%) and California (89%) reported DEI plans in place. It is also important to note, due to their unique contribution to state economies, understanding the priority of equity, or lack thereof, in state-level higher education strategic plans and the role of community colleges proves important for individual campuses' approach to achieving a more equitable campus (Morgenroth et al., 2021). Thus, context matters in how equity efforts are perceived on campus and what actions are occurring to put values into practice. These contextual differences were apparent in follow-up interviews with a set of mid-level leaders around the country. Equity or social justice was not discussed on campus given state politics, and the history of racism in some locations resulted in leaders on campus using coded language to support social justice. For example, a mid-level leader in the south commented on how campus efforts focused on social mobility versus social justice as the community would not react well to programming that explicitly supported students of color. The rhetoric of color-blind ideology (Williams, 2011) was seen in the commentary of several of the mid-level leaders that centered on treating all students the same and being "fair" versus addressing inequities in the system (Ray, 2019).

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Building a Leadership Blueprint for Change

Leader commitment to social justice and equity can bring about change on campus (Brown, 2004), yet as evident in the survey responses above, this commitment needs to move from merely espousing support for change and a check-the-box approach to plans and action for real change. This type of deep change requires questioning long-held assumptions about who belongs in college, who is a stakeholder, who has access and does not have access to power, and investigating how policies, processes, and systems serve to reinforce inequities (Ray, 2019). What type of blueprint should leaders follow to change outcomes? The American Association for Community Colleges (2020) offers a framework for action that includes five steps:

1. Define terms and identify desired behaviors
2. Assess the culture, policies, practices, and outcomes
3. Educate faculty, staff, and students about required cultural competencies
4. Implement policy reviews and inclusion principles
5. Ensure all voices are represented and heard

Translating this framework to key takeaways supplies components for a blueprint for change. The following are key components in helping VCCS campuses move forward to implement strategies for equity.

Individual Sensemaking

Before leaders can help others make sense of social justice and equity, they must first make sense of it for themselves (Weick et al., 2005). Because most community college leaders are white, they must first do the challenging work of self-reflection and education (DiAngelo, 2018). To move towards second-order, deep, transformative change requires engaging in reflective practice in general and questioning long-held assumptions on both a personal level and an organizational level (Bartunek & Moch, 1987). Indeed, the VCCS task force on diversity highlights the role of tempered radicals as catalysts for change on campus (Munday et al., 2019). These tempered radicals are able to question the status quo and push for change, in particular when these leaders work together, allowing for movement from the individual level to larger institutional change.

Cultural Audit and Use of Data

Understanding the campus culture, how that culture is sustained and reinforced, and building a shared reality with data on equity provides a critical step to achieving substantial change versus mere incremental change. Building a culture of equity-mindedness starts with looking at college data (Bensimon, 2006, 2007; Bensimon & Felix, 2019). The data snapshot above highlights who is attending community colleges and looking at outcomes variables is equally important. Research documents a racial transfer gap exists (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014) as do gaps in completion by race/ethnicity (Blom & Monarrez, 2020). Using data to identify outcomes for students of color and adult learners in community colleges. Using a set of secret shoppers (who might be graduate students from a nearby university) that can experience the processes and systems an adult learner has when trying to enroll in a program, what they experience in interactions with staff,

how they access information online, and what it "feels" like in a classroom setting can provide valuable feedback.

Courageous Conversations and Framing Social Justice and Equity on Campus

Leaders who are courageous address problems head-on, say aloud what needs to be said—even hard truths, take action, and hold people accountable (Tardanico, 2013). To have difficult conversations on campus, a brave space for dialogue needs to exist. Though these conversations often are fueled from ground up approaches, and formal leadership such as boards of trustees and presidents can be instrumental in creating and fostering a brave space for equity-centered dialogue. Furthermore, due to their formal and reward power, these entities can also incentivize participation in this brave culture. The data reported above, show that women and leaders of color feel less safe in these types of dialogues. Thus, ground rules are important to set up, surfacing and understanding the implicit biases we all hold must occur, and trust must build over time to make everyone feel safe in these dialogues. How leaders frame the conversation and equity on campus matters. Using data to confront unpleasant truths is a major step in building a shared sense of reality and using this data to build a singular and shared understanding requires intentional framing (Howson, 2021; Fairhurst, 2011). It is important to note, however, that data itself can hide institutional inequities by how it is collected, analyzed, and presented. Campus leaders must push for equity-centered institutional data practices as well as engaging with disaggregated data. How leaders frame situations help build a collective understanding among other campus members.

Promising Practices

Community colleges around the country are wrestling with how to promote racial equity and how to meet the needs of adult learners. Two examples are furnished to highlight how change can occur on campus. The first instance showcases the role of a supportive culture to carry out change, while the second highlights how faculty members are agents of change within their classrooms.

Virginia Snapshot

As the VCCS works to increase credential completion by 2% for adult students of color, it has begun to conduct research on this student base. This new information will help inform programming and progress over time. One in four students enrolled in community colleges in Virginia is 25 or older, and almost half of the enrolled students are students of color (47%). Existing programs (FastForward for short-term training, G3—Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back provides scholarships for qualified students, FANTIC-Financial Aid for Noncredit Training Leading to Industry Credentials) provide important onramps for students, particularly adults. Data from 2020 show more women adult learners are enrolled in the VCCS (66% compared to 56% women under 25). A look at completion rates highlights that adult learners earn more short-term credentials relative to traditionally aged students (24% v. 15%) and slightly more associate's degrees (61% v. 58%). Using qualitative data from ongoing landscape reviews can help inform action steps to improve persistence and completion. Support for students via the online SingleStop helps connect students with resources that allows them to stay engaged with their college program by meeting their basic needs.

San Antonio College, TX

San Antonio College (SAC) was selected as the 2021 Aspen Prize Winner. The Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence is awarded every two years and seeks "to celebrate excellence, advance a focus on equitable student success, and stimulate replication of effective culture and practice" (Aspen Institute, 2022, para. #1). As the 2021 winner of the prize, the data outcomes at SAC highlight the achievement of above-average rates for transfer and for completion of students of color. Undergirding these successes was creating a culture of care and attention on campus that students recognize and value. A strong advising function contributed to this culture of care. Embracing the concept of the "power of one" helps to amplify the success of students. When one student succeeds, they serve as a possibility model for others of what is achievable. A commitment to continuous improvement contributes to a culture of inquiry and action. Collectively, leaders, staff, and faculty at SAC ask if students are receiving what they need to be successful. Advisors regularly track how students are doing in their courses, track transfer and degree requirements, and constantly assess if advising practices are working. Moreover, this data-centric view extends into the classroom as faculty monitor student success rates and faculty receive development to improve their teaching practices. (See Making Success a Given for Students - The Aspen Institute College Excellence Program for more details.) SAC is an Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI; 64% of its students are Hispanic) and 35% of its students are adult learners (compared to the VCCS which has 25% enrollment by adults and 53% whites versus SAC's 22% whites). Borrowing exemplary strategies can provide a roadmap to improve adult student success in Virginia.

Monroe Community College, NY

Faculty at Monroe Community College (MCC) took part in a program funded by grants from the National Science Foundation: Supporting and Advancing Geoscience Education at Two-Year Colleges (SAGE 2YC): Faculty as Change Agents. (See the project page for curated resources--Supporting and Advancing Geoscience Education in Two-Year Colleges (carleton.edu). The program provided structured professional development with two overarching goals: to increase the use of high-impact evidence-based teaching practices and to build a national network of faculty leaders (O'Connell et al., 2022). The participating faculty from MCC investigated course-level student outcome data, which found differences in student outcomes based on race/ethnicity (Colosimo et al., 2022). Once they detected the equity gaps in their classes, they worked to educate their peers on inclusive teaching strategies, forming a departmental equity group that aligned their goals with institutional goals. The department level equity group joined other equity groups across campus in a summer teaching institute. A focus of the institute was conducting syllabi revisions that addressed assumptions faculty have about students, working on class syllabi to make them clearer for students, and including inclusive language within class materials. Faculty leaders engaged in grassroots change that influenced peers across campus in building inclusive classrooms using actionable practices. Central to the ability of these faculty to enact change was an investment in their professional development to learn more inclusive pedagogies. The VCCS enrolls slightly more students of color compared to MCC (47% v. 44%), but fewer adult learners (VCCS=25%, MCC=37%). Focusing on faculty development in the VCCS that emphasizes culturally responsive pedagogy and adult learning theory can help reduce equity gaps.

Action Steps

Moving forward to implement plans to improve equity on campus requires leaders shifting from words to action. Following are strategies leaders can put into practice.

Conduct an equity audit of on-campus data. What positions are held by people of color on campus? Do students see others who look like them? What populations of racially minoritized adult learners are in various programs? What are their levels of completion? How many are transferring? Where do equity gaps exist?

Engaging in Culturally Sustaining Governance. How are decision-making processes on campus equity-centered? How has the board of trustees, presidents, and cabinet members engaged in equity-centered practices and policymaking? How much do these leaders know about enrollment and success rates for racially minoritized adult learners? In what ways have those with access to power levers on campus educated themselves on campus issues of equity and sociopolitical issues of equity of the surrounding communities? How can the actual decision-making process be structured to be more equitable and allow for distributed power?

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Create or revisit the campus Diversity, Equity, Inclusion plan. Is there a shared understanding of terms? Have campus members and students had access to development on DEI skills and strategies? Where is accountability built into the plan? Check out DEI plans in the VCCS for examples (e.g., Brightpoint Community College, NOVA).

Invest in faculty development for inclusive pedagogy and equity-minded leadership. Do faculty know the success rates of adult/racially minoritized students in their classes? What changes to pedagogy are needed to make classrooms inclusive? How do faculty employ asset-based approaches in their work with students? Do campus leaders (department chairs, deans, directors, etc.) receive training on equity-centered leadership approaches? How are equity-minded leaders incentivized and promoted on campus? How are non-equity-minded leaders disincentivized on campus?

Walk the talk of equity. How is equity framed on campus? How are racially minoritized adults referenced in conversations around equity? Are there safe spaces for dialogue to occur? Is there accountability around the metrics of equitable success? What systems and policies exist that reinforce racist practices? Who are the equity champions on campus?

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