

Starting with FREEDOM IN MIND:

Moving Beyond
Diversity to Racial
Equity

Dr. Mayra Padilla,
Equity Champion Consultant
California

Dr. Edward C. Bush,
Equity Champion Consultant
California



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The seminal book on guided pathways, *Redesigning America's Community Colleges* (Bailey et al., 2015), outlines the importance of college stakeholders who seek to successfully adopt a guided pathways approach to start with the students' end goal in mind. This end-in-mind approach at the onset of institutional guided pathways adoption is foundational as it provides the clarity colleges need to build its student support and academic programs that are responsive to the intended outcomes of the students' journey. In other words, the entire apparatus of a college must be organized to maximize the students' opportunity to reach their end goal, which is depicted in the guided pathways model as the student's ability to be placed in a career and/or transfer to a four-year college.

While this is a fine goal, the reality is that systems of oppression continue to operate and produce disproportionately negative life outcomes for people of color, even when they have earned degrees. The impacts of colonization run deep, as Frantz Fanon noted in his pivotal work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon, 1961, pp. 1–62). His observations on the impact of colonization and the subsequent struggle for liberation provide a powerful lesson for educational leaders who desire to create equitable institutions. This framework challenges college stakeholders who are tasked with implementing guided pathways to fundamentally reassess how one defines success and the end goal of students. Success for our colleges cannot be relegated to infinitesimal improvements in student educational outcomes. Rather, success through the lens of Fanon is a college's ability to question every aspect of how the organization functions and to grapple with how these practices are rooted in European colonial values and traditions that keep communities and students of color dependent on people outside of their communities to sustain their livelihoods.

Many education scholars have eloquently and passionately offered historical context, theory and data explaining that our nation is in this critical state of poor educational outcomes because we continue to design our efforts, as Jeff Duncan Andrade puts it, to “school” students rather than truly educating them (Rooted in Relationships: Episode 2.3 - Jeff Duncan-Andrade - Centering Wellness on Apple Podcasts, n.d.). That is, our schools are designed to institutionalize people, so they assimilate into a supremacist structure and accept their position in this society.

While in the United States we purport to value freedom, the right to independence and self-determination, as we have already stated Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities are forced to depend on people outside of their communities for their economic well-being and students of color are forced to conform into an educational system that they have had no input in creating and that continues to perpetuate disproportionate outcomes for racially minoritized populations.

“I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.”

~ bell hooks

Traditional student success measures such as job placement and transfer have value, but fall short of producing the type of educational impact that creates students who are prepared to dismantle systems that produce barriers in the communities they come from. The end-in-mind or success for students of color should also focus on dismantling, decolonizing, and reconstructing systems that are rooted in institutional racism and White supremacy.

By contrast, consider the relationship that students have to our institutions of higher education and the concept of academic freedom. Academic freedom is a bedrock of higher education. As a nation we have put forth the full power of the law to define and defend the rights of faculty to be the sole determinants of what they teach and how they teach it. How might we transform higher education and by extension our world if we endow students with academic freedom? Imagine a reality in which students have the legal right to determine what they learn and how they learn it best. What might our colleges, pathways, services, and classrooms look like in this new vision?

A move toward this just vision requires us to shift away from an elitist approach that identifies professionals as the only people that know what is “right” for our students to one of collective liberation that acknowledges the cultural wealth our students bring and that by upholding systems of oppression, everyone suffers. Academic freedom in this frame must therefore transcend a state of self-determination to a state of collective-determination to hold a more complex reality in which our students have the right to an education that is aligned with their values, that they help co-create, and that provides them the skills to disrupt injustice and to construct a just world that is grounded in improved well-being for all.

Building upon the Guided Pathways framework the authors offer the following questions for colleges to consider applying a liberatory race conscious approach to implementing guided pathways (Garcia, 2022). We ask that you juxtapose our guided questions listed below with the questions provided in the following two resources:

1. [CCRC Guided Pathways Scale of Adoption Self-Assessment Tool](#)
2. [Integrating Racial Equity into Guided Pathways](#)

Clarifying the pathway

- What would be the implication for the institution if liberation was the end goal?
- Are you using a deficit- or an asset-based lens?
- Are your strategies student- or institution-facing?
- Are you preparing our students to dismantle systems and structures that serve as barriers to economic, social, and academic success?
- Are you hiring faculty, administrators, and staff that are skilled at dismantling systems that disproportionately create barriers for students of color?

Entering the path

- How do we identify our students' strengths, gifts, and passions to help them choose a career and life path?
- How do we support our students' sense of entrepreneurship and innovation, so they are not limited to being workers?
- How do we leverage cultural wealth and diverse ways of being and knowing into our pathways?

Keeping students on the path

- How do we empower students to define their own end goal and to monitor their own progress?
- How effective are we at providing resources that remove students' financial barriers?
- How well do we monitor institutional barriers that cause students to deviate from their program?
- How effective are we to discontinue the practices that create barriers?
- Do we have culturally relevant asset-based student supports?
- Whose experiences and ways of being and knowing are centered in our practices and policies (as opposed to whiteness being the default archetype)?
- Do we hire faculty that has demonstrated success with racially minoritized students?
- Have we identified faculty in gateway courses that have demonstrated success and/or failure in teaching students of color?
- How many faculty of color is your students encountering if they adhere to their academic program maps?

Learning on the path

- How are students supporting the co-creation of curriculum and pathways?
- Is the curriculum that students will take on this path culturally relevant and does it center their experiences and histories?
- Whose experiences and ways of being and knowing are centered in our practices and policies (as opposed to whiteness being the default archetype)?
- Are we as educators dismantling, decolonizing, and reconstructing systems of injustice?
- Are we teaching students how to remove systemic barriers to their success?

Final Thoughts

We ask educators to move past our current institutionalization model and aspire to something greater—a liberatory educational experience for all. Educators must approach this work with deep care and thoughtfulness. They must balance their preferences with our students' preferences and move beyond educating the mind to educating the whole human being. They must create inclusive learning spaces where different ways of being and knowing are welcomed and honored. They must develop race consciousness, promote multiculturalism, and respond to the socio-political context of local communities. They must center the histories, cultures, languages, epistemologies, and methodologies of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people (Garcia, 2017). If we start with freedom in mind, then the highest priority of higher education is the liberation of our students, faculty, and staff from a colonial framework to transform our community and our broader society for our collective good.

“When we identify where our privilege intersects with somebody else’s oppression, we’ll find our opportunities to make real change”

~ Ijeoma Oluo (author of *So You Want to Talk About Race*.)

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