Problematizing Guided Pathways from an Activist Leadership Lens

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Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Greetings! I'm Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, Dean of Equity, Justice and Strategic Partnerships at the University of Pittsburgh, where I also serve as a professor in higher education. Let me begin by extending thanks to those of you choosing to join us today.

We greatly appreciate your listening in, and I want to extend very special thanks to our panelists, Drs. Felecia Commodore, Ed Bush, and Richard Reddick, who are with us today to have some really wonderful conversations and to take a deeper dive as we digest and problematize Guided Pathways from activist leadership lens. And so, at this time I want to invite my guests to tell a little bit more about themselves.

So, I'm going to start with you, Dr. Commodore. If you would introduce yourself to our audience. Tell us a little bit about your background. And then we'll popcorn over to Dr. Bush.

Dr. Felecia Commodore: Okay. Thank you, Dr. Zamani-Gallaher. I'm glad to be a part of this conversation today. My name is Felecia Commodore, I'm an Associate Professor of Higher Education at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia. My research coalesces into three areas. One is looking at leadership, governance and administrative practices with a focus primarily on minority serving institutions in historically black colleges and universities.

And then my second area is that I look at issues of governance, including Board of Trustees, organizational behavior, organizational decision making, organizational culture, and the way all of those things play a role in bringing about more equitable higher education institutions, and also looking at the relationship that black women have with leadership in higher education. And so ultimately, I really am interested in how leadership and decision-making practices at institutions can lead to more equitable experiences and a more inclusive experiences for those involved in higher education.

Dr. Edward Bush: Hello, my name is Edward Bush. Been in post-secondary educational space since 1998, with the vast majority of that time being in the California community college system. Currently have the pleasure of serving as President of Consumnes River College in Sacramento, California, and have operated in that capacity since 2015, so I'm going in my eighth year as college president in this role.

My institution has been an early adopter within Guided Pathways. So I'm looking forward to our conversation around taking an equity and race conscious approach to that work. In addition to serving as college president, I also have the privilege of being a co-founder of African American Male Education Network in Development, otherwise known as A2MEND, which is a non-profit consisting of African-American male administrators and faculty in a California community college system that is working to dismantle structures that have not been conducive to facilitating the success of African-American men, whether students, faculty or staff or administrators.

And so that is a little bit about me and the work that I'm doing, but looking forward to further engaging in this important topic today.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Thanks so much, Dr. Reddick.

Dr. Richard Reddick: It's great to be here. Good to see everybody. Great to be part of this conversation. My name is Rich Reddick, I am the Senior Vice Provost for Curriculum and Enrollment and the Dean of

Undergraduate Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. I've been doing this job for about two and a half months, so I'm new to this game but I have been at UT-Austin since 2007, had my entire academic career here. I am a full professor in the College of Education, in the program of Higher Education Leadership. My research interests are on the experiences of Black faculty at predominantly White institutions, issues of cultural taxation for faculty of color, the experiences of people of color generally in higher education institutions and I have an interest in black families and HBCUs as well. I think the thing I think about most importantly in this work is, as a first generation African-American male student who's a Pell Grant recipient, my career has been somewhat not as planned as people think it might have been, and it's just about having been in the right mentor circles, having the right support and the right guidance that I am where I am. But I'm still in the space of learning, so I'm eager to be part of this conversation and learn from my colleagues. So, it's great to be here, thank you for inviting me.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Thanks so much. Happy for our audience to learn a little bit more about each of you and as we have this conversation with one another, again, today's topic being problematizing Guided Pathways and thinking about it from an activist leadership lens. Well, we all know Guided Pathways has been an educational reform to an effort that's really kind of been launched countrywide at this point, has expanded across postsecondary education, mainly within the community college sector. But as a model, Guided Pathways is structured whereby it is intended to provide air quotes “all students with successful matriculation to and through college.” So how we clarify these enrollment on ramps and avenues, how we look to make more plain what course taking should look like and what their patterns relative to their attendance and the wraparound support services should entail.

So, while there are many colleges that have implemented Guided Pathways, not as many have done so with the same intentionality, nor was the model kind of birth from its onset in terms of its origin from a equity focused framework and more explicitly from a race forward, race conscious equity position. And so, as we think about being more equity centered and Guided Pathways as a framework and that it could have the potential, and we'd like to see the potential of it to help us move the needle in terms of racial inequities.

Can you all speak to what ways do you perceive that Guided Pathways could allow for forging not just how we clarify a path, get a student on a path, and ensure that they're learning in the path, but how might it be more responsive and an aid to removing systemic inequities and obstacles mainly for racially minoritized students to be successful? I'll start with you Dr. Reddick.

Dr. Richard Reddick: I think it's a great question Eboni and I'm going to take the approach of thinking about the student holistically and Peter Gomes, who was the chaplain at Harvard for many years, kind of a hero of mine, used to say “students are more than brains on a stick.” And so, students come with complex identities, intersecting identities, histories, backgrounds, stories of origin and the fact that their a continuous story. I think a lot of times we have to be mindful of the fact that our students may be balancing families, they may be balancing jobs, they may be balancing other crises, health concerns, and so forth in their lives.

And so we take the time to support students, we have to think about them holistically. And so, one thing I talk about a lot of times with faculty and staff is the concept of office hours. I'm going to borrow from my friend Tony Jack here, office hours is often posed as you go to the office hours when you have a question to ask about something, or you go visit the office and really debunking and breaking apart what

that actually can consist of, which is you're a whole person, so you get to come to us and talk about your whole experiences.

And obviously it takes time for us to build a relationship and trust, but that has to be central to what we do. And I think also as instructors and administrators, we have a responsibility to talk about our own sort of journeys. Because a lot of times people don't believe this, but I think students will put you on a pedestal because you have an advanced degree and not necessarily know that you might have struggled through, you might still be struggling through parts of your life. And so, in my own research I've found that the more humble and personable you can be and vulnerable you can be in the classroom or in the administrative setting, the more likely students are to share things with you and say I'm having a hard time getting to these meetings on time because my car is broken down.

Things that they thought initially were not part of the conversation become part of the conversation. When you open up yourself and talk about the fact that you are in fact, also a human being. I have a pre-teen and a teenage child, trust me, every day is a struggle. So, I bring that to what I do, and people often appreciate that. They're like, yo, I'm struggling too. I have this going on and I make myself as human as possible when I'm interacting with students. And that also means that I get to hear more about what their stories are and what their challenges are. And a lot of times the assumption is that, well, I'm working with this issue that's financial and I really can't ask you for help. But if you articulate the concerns you have, perhaps I have ways or I have resources or I have colleagues who can help you. And a big part of it, I know for me especially being first gen, is that I always felt like I need to be suited booted it and not have any issues, just come there, ask my question and get out of the office.

Now, let me actually tell you things that are happening with me that I really need some help with. And maybe you're the person who can help me, maybe you're not but I just need some assistance in these areas. I just think one really important thing for us, especially those of us who share a cultural commonality with the students or even proximal to their experiences, we can really be transparent about our struggles, the things that we work through, and that helps them to understand that we're here to see them through their experience, not just getting the degree or advancing their education, but actually seeing them fulfill their potential as a human being.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Thanks so much, Dr. Commodore would you care to share your thoughts?

Dr. Felecia Commodore: Yeah. So, one of the ways I think about Guided Pathways and how they can be used kind of to approach servicing students in more equitable ways is for me, I like to think about things from kind of an organizational standpoint. And so often when we talk about Guided Pathways, we're often talking about it from a programmatic kind of standpoint and how it's being delivered, how we integrate services and things of that nature.

But one of the things I would argue is that it's really hard for an effort from an institution to kind of slap equity onto itself when the ways in which decisions that have been made regarding that effort have not been equitable themselves. And so one of the ways that I think Guided Pathways can be developed and designed in a way that promotes more equity, particularly racial equity, is that as various elements of that Guided Pathways program or effort at the institution is being designed and decisions are being made, whether that's about funding, support or what part of the institutional structures is going to be involved, then that process within itself has to be more equitable. And that the governance practice that goes in place has to be equity centered from the beginning so that it filters throughout the way in which

Guided Pathways is exercised. And I think that helps when we get to the actual application of things, whether it's advising, whether it is the faculty that are involved, whether it is the different paths we're even guiding these students to. I think if we begin to think about how we're setting things up, the decisions, and making equity center place to begin with, we're more likely to then have measures of accountability, ways in which to check in, ways in which its designed that hold equity as a pillar of what we're trying to do, as opposed to an afterthought of what we're trying to do. And so, I think that also means that some of our leadership that often is not involved in the nuts and bolts of how we exercise and apply Guided Pathways, so our presidents, our VP's, our directors, sometimes even our boards have to also be able to understand Guided Pathways as needing to be equity centered in the way in which they make decisions that budgets all of these things. And so for me, that is an element and I think often isn't discussed, but I think it could make a difference in how Guided Pathways is viewed and communicated and applied within an institution.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Okay, I want to keep with that, but add a little bit more as we transition to Dr. Bush. Dr. Bush, you mentioned that your college, where you are president, that in those roles you're one of the early adopters of Guided Pathways. And Guided Pathways as a reform has taken place at so many colleges across the country, some estimates are at least one out of five colleges, and we know that much of, I think the leaning into and embracing of Guided Pathways is really, I think largely due to an emphasis on program mapping. So how do we more comprehensively, intentionally think about influencing students' experiences in terms of more of a programmatic or curricular process and clarifying of the path?

But, I'm just curious from your standpoint as an early adopter, and this whole notion of while we want to close equity gaps in college completion, that while Guide Pathways has presented some promising results but when we disaggregate that data and look at underrepresented students of color that are disproportionately also low income, first gen, have other compounding challenges, we don't see the same types of equity peaks if you will, or moving in ways where these students...it's not really addressing, if I can say, the same obstacles for student success for racial minoritized folks as it is with the more mainstream student body. So, if you could kind of speak to that?

Dr. Edward Bush: I would love to. Perhaps I would start in saying why I gravitated as an educational leader to do the Guided Pathways work, and really worked with my institution for us to engage in this work fairly early in terms of the California adoption of Guided Pathways and it really centered around I think three areas.

One, it was already in alignment with the direction in which we were moving the institution. All the strategies that I thought would be critical to improve student outcomes while simultaneously closing the gap in achievement. So, we knew, absent of the redesigning American community colleges, that time was the enemy for community college students. The longer it would take, the more hurdles that you had to overcome, and the less likely it would be for you to successfully complete. So, we knew we had to reduce time to completion, we knew that students would languish in remedial education if they were placed in several classes below college level, English and math. So, in our institution we were already having a conversation moving towards placing students directly in college level English and math, having them enroll in 15 units. And so, when I came across the seminal text on Guided Pathways, it was congruent and aligned with the direction we were moving in as an institution anyway. So that allowed that work to resonate without us having to reinvent the wheel locally within our own institutions.

Secondly, what I appreciated about the Guided Pathways framework is that it centered students, and for most part didn't blame students. And so, it really allowed us to look at institutional practices and see the reason why students are not achieving the outcomes we want to see based on a deficiency of the college themselves in how it is structured, versus something that could be ascribed to one's demographic culture, the level of importance they placed on education, so on and so forth.

Our lack of preparation when they come to college, I think we all heard those excuses why students are not performing well, so that was the second part. And third, it really did cause for an interrogation of current institutional practices. So, I viewed it as more than an initiative, our program, but as an opportunity to usurp the status quo, to have the conversation about fundamentally making structural and systemic changes within our institution. And I, fundamentally do believe that if we are going to close the racial opportunity gap that exists, we have to change systems and structures and not develop new programs and initiatives. And this was one of the first opportunities that I saw that was being proposed that will allow us to question the system and the structure itself. And once we start that interrogation, I think it opens up the opportunity for those who are going to approach the work through a race conscious lens to ask those critical questions as well as why was this system designed, and who was it designed for?

And then it makes sense why we have the lack of representation of our institution, then it makes sense why the curriculum is designed a certain type of way, then it makes sense why we continue to see disparate outcomes among students of color because that is how the structure is designed. And so, the only way we will fix it is by attacking and dismantling that structure and developing a new one.

And so for me, Guided Pathways opened up that window that allowed us to fully look at ourselves through that lens, to say, “hey the status quo is not acceptable.” And if I could get folks to understand that the status quo is not acceptable, then that puts us ahead of the game to do this work.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Thank you so much for that, because I think a couple of takeaways from what you just said, as well as in terms of reflecting on the discussion with Drs. Commodore and Reddick. These are complex reforms and arguably still new in many ways in terms of the model and how to truly cultivate it. And I think you raise some interesting food for thought around the necessary changes that are required in terms of organizational practice, in terms of institutional climate and culture.

And that for some institutions where they may not have, kind of a default, of wanting to think about how they systematically may have...and again, inadvertently, unwittingly, maybe moved or advised students of color into programs that lead to low status, low lower paying jobs or lesser mobility. In terms of further education, I think to your point, Guided Pathways provides some benchmarks in terms of prompting institutions to be more predictive, not as much prescriptive. But I do think it is prescriptive in many ways, but proactive in how you utilize analytics, how you engage with your data, how you reflect on your practices to kind of gauge what's happening with your students, with their grades, with their attendance, and just any other indicators.

Dr. Edward Bush: I could give you a real practical example of that. So, one of the things that we did at my institution, we studied the behavior of successful students. Then really did ask ourselves the question, how can we get more students to engage in that particular type of behavior that would lead to a greater likelihood of success? And of course, like other institutions, we were not different the students who were attempting 12 to 15 units a semester, taking college level English and math in their first

semester, was having a higher likelihood of graduating and completing within a reasonable time period, right on time completion.

But when we disaggregated the students who were likely to exhibit those behavior, we know those were not black and brown students. And so, what we were finding when our students were being advised or even when students did kind of the self-advisement, they were opting out of participating in taking 15 units because they were viewed from really a deficit lens where you're coming from high school, and you struggle, or you come from a low-income background. You know, start slow, take two classes, don't take English and math the first semester, spread that out because it's too rigorous.

And so, students of color were getting advised differently based on, I think counselors and advisors, and others having what would be positive intentions, but it was actually setting up our students for failure. So as a default, we said we're going to have an opt out schedule. Every student who comes to our institution, we're going to give them 15 units, if they don't want it, they have to opt out. They are going to be in English and math college level in their first semester, so it eliminated the bias in advising. So, to speak, because the default was all the students who come to us are going to emulate the behavior of successful students. And guess what? The greatest impact of us moving in that direction was on black and brown students.

In some areas, we totally eliminated the achievement gap in less than a year with our Latin X students just by resetting the bar and our expectation of what is possible for them. And so, Eboni I think that really just goes to your point around not setting up defaults that assume that our students are capable as opposed to leaving it in our hands. But we often times look at our students as being deficient, are incapable of doing something and setting them up for failure.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: As you're talking, you're making me think of and what you've done with the example that you've provided us. I immediately started to think about Dorinda Carter-Andrew's work in terms of achievement as resistance. And so, you as a leader, again, talk about activist leadership, resisted what is that commonplace default of deficit framing relative to folk of color. And instead said, we will examine what it is we do from an embodiment of an asset-based approach.

Because Dorinda's work really talks about critical race achievement ideology. So that is a mindset of understanding and having the default of expectations that are high. And when that expectancy of us folk is there, that is no question that students can rise to the challenge when put in environments that see them, as you said, as able to achieve, to perform at high levels, to be successful, and to not be re-routed into areas where there are credentials of value or opportunities for further education.

But I want to kind of take that and then move back to Dr. Reddick and Dr. Commodore. And so, as President Bush was telling us about how he's been effective and his staff and the educators at Los Rios around moving the needle with black and brown students in terms of how they matriculate and their graduation rates.

We recently had a report from the Joint Center of Politics and of Political and Economic Studies just in the last few weeks around this gap between mainly Black students with White students in terms of graduation rates. We know that is more than double, we also have seen at the same time what are really marked declines in community college students, particularly Black students. And then we see some things that play out differently in terms of Black students getting certificates at higher rates than

other groups, but not necessarily, the degrees. And so, I just wanted to ask you again as your portfolio at UT-Austin really speaks to, doing the work of closing gaps, thinking about engaging with the community, doing outreach with underserved pops, and really trying to actualize equity.

Dr. Reddick, can you talk to us a little bit about what some of your thoughts are with that and what onus lies there in? And with not just the community colleges, but our four-year university partners with regard to enhancing upwardly mobile pathways and on ramps for racial minoritized students.

Dr. Richard Reddick: It's a great question. And one thing at the University of Texas I think we do really well, is that we attend to the fact that we have a several success programs that focus on students who are first generation college, Pell Grant eligible and so on and so forth. So, we look at these populations especially, but we also think it's really important to, and this is what we've been talking about, to really re-orient the understanding of those student experiences and stop talking from deficits and start talking from, Tara Yosso would say "a community cultural wealth perspective." What strengths are our students bringing to the college environment? And frankly, taking responsibility for some of the things that we don't do well. So, we've gone through some of our processes including things like financial bars and revisited and said, are those things that we want to have prohibiting and inhibiting success for our students?

And this is what I was talking about earlier, the importance of understanding, and digging deeper, and finding out the full story behind student experiences. A lot of times academic difficulty is the indicator or symptom of a greater issue that's happening. And if we just say, well, the problem is academic performance, we need to fix that, we are missing the bigger issue that's at play. Some students are food insecure, the student has housing insecurity, the student has financial concerns. Then that's going to influence and augment everything they do. So, we can sort of patch things, or we can get to the root of the issue. And so, I think it becomes about things like advising on a very deep level, building relationships with students so they do feel they're part of a family and community. So, when they are having problems, a lot of times using the peer environment as a space where that happens because we talk a lot about bystander intervention. So, a lot of times maybe a student wouldn't be willing to go talk to even the most friendly, approachable advisor, but they'll tell a classmate, and the classmate needs to know that they can let us know. Hey, I've got a classmate who's having these challenge, I would appreciate you telling me things, I can tell them to get them to get to you at some point to help you more intentionally. But, doing the work at scale is incredibly challenging and incredibly consuming. And I'm really grateful to the fact that we have incredible staff members who dedicate so much time to supporting our students.

And we always tell students we're here when you first encounter the university until you move on to your next stage in life. And so, one of the most uplifting things I get to do is go to our first gen or University of Leadership Network graduation ceremonies, and you'll see students that you've seen for the last three or four years, and they will talk about the triumph they feel.

And they'll also talk about the fact that it wouldn't have been possible if it hadn't been for the successes and the connections they've had in working with our staff. But also, quite frankly, we can do better work outreaching to families. So, the student is not sort of surrendered to the university, but their parents are also partners in the process, I think it's a really important part of it. We find that's particularly true for students of color, we often talk about the fact that we're not recruiting students, we recruit families. So,

if an abuela and a Tio is there, they're going to be part of the experience too. We want to make sure they feel comfortable accessing the space so I can talk again.

As a first-generation professor and administrator, my parents still don't enjoy visiting campus. They get confused easily, they don't know where to park at, all those kind of things still happen. So, if my parents feel that way and they've got a child who works at the university, I can only imagine what parents feel like when their student is at the university for the first or second or third year.

So always being mindful of the fact that we are not simply looking at one individual, but we're looking at an entire family. And the other thing we think about is that when we support a student and get a student successfully to the level of graduation, we've changed the script not just for that student, but for that family and for that community, because now we have a proof point.

We can say if you're from Uvalde, if you're from McAllen, if you're from Acres Homes, we've actually taken students from your environment in your community and had a successful experience, so you can have one too. So, we see it as not just something we do to assist one person, but something we do to really demonstrate that we have the capacity and the capabilities of supporting all of our students.

It's hard work. It's certainly what we have to reflect on all the time, we have to reflect on the times we're not successful. We have to also think about how we can be more intentional in our work. And what President Bush said earlier, which I think is really important, is the structural problems that we inhabit. Sometimes you think about the fact the structures themselves need to change rather than saying the students need to change or we need to make them better aligned to the things we're doing, maybe we need to change the structures all together.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Dr. Commodore, earlier you talked about the need for Guided Pathways to clearly embed an equity focus. And you reminded us that, similar to comments from Drs. Reddick and for President Bush, that if we don't intentionally structure, kind of have an equity focused framework to how we implement Guided Pathways, then we most certainly know that we're not going to really readily address opportunity gaps.

And I want to talk to you because much of your expertise around equity also is about, if we're thinking about activist leadership, is about having boards involved, how do we get boards involved? How do we consider racial equity at the board level? We all have seen, particularly in the last two years, I loosely say, a push for racial equity, because I think that the urgency of some to want to address what has been centuries old complex racial relations and tensions, has really just come to the surface for some folks so they're just now having their reckoning, just now reconciling. We need to push for race equity in higher ed, but I also just thought it would be worth pursuing with you, as we consider Guided Pathways on one hand, and as we think about kind of adjacent to that, but really should be much more interwoven and tightly coupled racial equity initiatives and efforts, particularly stemming from boards of trustees.

Can you kind of talk to us a little bit more about that? Because I know your work again, whether it's thinking about governance from faculty development or academic Senates, but also call to action on race and equity in how we really do need activist leadership at a board level, at that decision making body, the highest level in terms of organizational leadership.

Can you talk to us about the critical role that they have in helping us to actualize race equity within pathways?

Dr. Felecia Commodore: Sure. I think, so boards I find, which in somewhat has led me to this work, are often left out all these conversations. We don't talk about them and particularly when we start talking about things like equity and diversity and stuff and we don't bring boards in. And what I think that does is often let boards off the hook for the role that they play in setting agendas and policy and things of that nature that impact equitable outcomes.

And I always joke with people that boards have no problems crossing boundaries and getting in the weeds for everything until we start talking about racial equity. And then all of a sudden, they're like, well, that's not you know, we don't want to overstep. And it's like, now's the time you might want to speak up a little bit, not necessarily about, the basketball coach, but to get to the boards and thinking about their role. I think first boards have to start with themselves and that is, is there equitable practices happening within their board? Whether that's board composition, so who sits on the board, whether that's their processes of engaging in making decisions, who has voice and both?

If you have a student rep on your board, but they don't have a vote, what is that saying? If you have a faculty rep on your board but they don't have a vote, what is that saying about what you believe in value and in equity, in voice and vote? And we know at many community colleges their board members, particularly if they're public, they are appointed people. And so really thinking about, so a lot of board members would be like, “well, we have no control over that.” But there are ways in which board members can lobby and advocate to push, and even presidents to some extent, to make sure people are in those networks so that we can have more diverse representation on boards. And also, in many community colleges the board members, there's an intentionality to have board members who are from the various communities represented at the community college or that that community college serves.

So, this again is thinking about what are their communities that are more represented than other communities and how does that impact the decisions that are made, the conversations that are had? So, I think that's one way that boards can start is just even looking at themselves and how they approach their work. I think the second way is really understanding how boards, because they don't do the day to day operations stuff on institutions campus, they don't get into the weeds, but there are ways in which they can partner with those who are doing that work in ways that help. And I say this kind of like, as to shift the flow of resources so that they can support and uphold those practices and programs and structures that are ensuring the equitable outcomes happen.

And so, there's a piece that myself, Dimitri Morgan, and Lucy Lupo did where we looked at boards of trustees, mostly four-year institutions, but looking at boards of trustees and the ways in which they did or did not partner with DEI initiatives and efforts on their campuses. And so, what we were able to derive from that research is that boards kind of fall into these typologies and you have some boards who have a high capacity to duty.

I work, but a low kind of, they're kind of late to partnership and difference...we have a whole matrix for but ultimately we're saying there are boards who have the capacity to partner but don't know how to do it or are late to doing it. And so, what it can do is, actually impede DEI work from being as robust as it can on the campus.

And so, we encourage boards in that piece to think of themselves as electrical sockets. And so, electrical sockets, there's always power behind the socket, but it isn't activated until something plugs in to the socket. And so, we present this metaphor to say that boards have the power to actually partner and

support and give resources, power, whatever is needed to make that DEI effort robust. But if they never actually partner, if they never have those DEI folks plug into them, then all that power is wasted. And so, when we're thinking about activist boards or thinking about boards who are going to be more proactive in pushing for equitable outcomes, particularly in Guided Pathways. I think it's on boards and board leadership to be diligent in identifying what are the efforts happening on our campus, who are the people on our campus that are really in the trenches and thinking about how do we create these more equitable outcomes, and how do we then partner with them as board members who have access to resources, who have access to power, who have influence on policy setting and agenda setting? And particularly in the public space, you even have the ability to lobby and advocate at a state level at a legislative level for the institutions and what they're doing. So how can I partner with these folks so that I'm not trying to do their job, but I'm giving them the support and the backing and the resources so that they can do their job well, in a more robust way.

And so, I think for much time, we have seen boards kind of just sit back, get a report from a diversity officer or VP and be like, okay, well, that's what they're doing and that's great, and they move on to something that deals with finances or things like that. But I think in the space that we're in, particularly when, if we're honest, resources are being connected to outcomes. If we are going to be responsible in ensuring that we're not just hitting kind of these generic outcomes, but we are hitting these equitable outcomes and servicing all of our students well, then I think it's imperative that boards start to think about how they can be good partners in that work and use their influence, their access to resources to ensure that the work that is happening on their campuses is not only executing their mission to its fullest capability, but doing so in a way that is pushing forward, equitable successes for the students at their campus.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: No doubt. Yeah, a couple of takeaways again. You all are dropping in such pearls of wisdom, I think for me, and for our audience. But the through line for me in what you just said is, that in all aspects of board work is that one, we need board members that are culturally proficient, that we probably should be more active in terms of how we address equity competencies of boards or how boards can do. And that equity has to be one of their top strategic priorities because we have again, through the work that you've done with Demetria and Lucy, a range or a spectrum and continuum of which, boards are held accountable or not for the extent to which, they are contributing and or committed to EDI efforts. And so when they are, I imagine that makes a powerful statement and that much of the accountability is also with regard to the community.

And so how active a contributor or not that they are...and one of the things I thought of as you were talking, I was like, we got this range with the typology of, we have board members who want to just, it's like, wait, EDIB? And they want to do the sidestep and others that would be interested, but they've been sidelined. And so that there's a way in which we have to move from more of a passive to a proactive way in terms of the strategic priorities and the inclusion in making diversity, equity and inclusion and belonging more apparent with the board so that, pun intended, the boards need to be on board.

Dr. Felecia Commodore: And I wanted to add to that because you brought up a really important thing, too, that we found, is that boards who want to start moving towards a more equity centered approach to their work often have to be educated. When we think about who sits on boards, it's not usually people from education sectors, these are mostly business folks, people from business, industry or politicians, things of that nature.

And so their understanding of equity is often limited and not as they don't often understand it in terms of kind of education, educational outcomes. And so, there is an element of education that has to happen. And one of the things that we push for boards who want to engage in more equity centered governance practices is that there is a responsibility for the board to have some sort of socio-political awareness and understanding some basic principles of equity and inclusion and things of that nature, so that they can have an informed conversation.

And I think that is hump that boards find themselves in because as you mentioned, there's usually one or two people who are like really passionate about it and other people are like, I don't really care and so that is a challenge to navigate. But there is an education gap or knowledge gap, I think there sometimes with boards around these things that has to be addressed so that they can engage in this work in equity centered ways.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Dr. Bush, I want to circle back to you. I know much of the work you've done over the years has really prioritized and centered on the needs of Black students and namely Black males annually, as you hold a summit around Black males. But I guess one of the things as we think through barriers that present themselves as Black students are trying to traverse higher ed, and we know that Black students remain disproportionately represented in community colleges. That there are barriers in terms of producing equitable outcomes or students reaching their full potential, that sometimes, I don't know, that there's a recognition that part of as we think through Guided Pathways that is not just that we get a student on a path and try to encourage them to stay on the path, but in being in that pathway, we have to also be thinking about whether or not students are being met with hostile hallways if there's a chilly campus climate. And so, that is as we think about these outcome measures, sometimes I know the only way over is through, but sometimes our students are getting through in spite of the institutions, not because of the institutions, or that we're experiencing lower graduation rates because of issues of climate and culture.

And so, I know that the racial divide is nothing new, but I think sometimes it's lost on folks that some of those dilemmas and differences in race resonate and bubble up and manifest on community college campuses.

Dr. Edward Bush: Absolutely, I think the implication is even much deeper than that. When we look at student outcomes or the lack thereof, our attention and in many ways I understand, rightfully so, is focused on the students who didn't complete. I mean particularly when we're looking at African-American students, what is going to happen to their economic and social trajectory if they were unable to navigate the community college space?

But not only do I think about and have concern for those students, when we approach this work through a race conscious lens, we have to question everything. We have to question our own notions and assumptions about success. And so, what I am also concerned about are the students who we define as being successful Black students who are able to navigate their way through the system.

When you think about what it is that they are espoused to, you have to question them, what and how intact are they leaving our institution from a cultural perspective? How much of foreign ideology and concepts have they had to internalize in order to be successful in the classroom? How much of their own spirit and culture, understanding norms and ontology had to be suppressed in order to navigate the curriculum?

What is the impact on their psyche? To never have a black teacher, a student of color, because they are adherent to a program map that only considered course scheduling, they didn't consider whether or not that student would encounter someone that looks like them along that particular pathway. And so, I think part of our work as educators, race conscious educators, is to redefine what is success? Is it merely graduation rates? Is it merely just a gap in achievement that we're trying to close? We have to ask if a student gets through and was able to navigate through community college, through Ph.D., but they are unable to have a conversation with their grandmother back home, they no longer can connect with the folks in the communities that they come from, do we call that success? Or when we talk about redesigning community colleges, should we have those things in consideration as well? That then would beg the question is what type of curriculum are students espoused to, what type of teachers? And so, I think that becomes, I think, extremely important when we do this work and leadership matters. I think we had a time where we just we need radical leadership, those who are unapologetic in speaking up on behalf of those students who are being historically marginalized. That is leaders that will be more focused on impact than we are with longevity, for example.

And so, I like to think of myself not as the CEO of my institution, but the CAO, the Chief Agitator Officer, understanding the stains of racism runs deep and it permeates our institution and is not going to be eradicated by simply put it in the water and put it on a spin cycle that it has to be shaken.

And we as leaders have to shake our institutions to remove the stains associated with anti-blackness, institutional racism, patriarchy and the like because if we continue just to do work as usual, we are going to get the same results.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: Dr. Reddick any thoughts there?

Dr. Richard Reddick: I would co-sign on everything that was said. I think President Bush really sort of spoke about the challenges we have as institutional leaders. We are part institution, and we are ostensibly part of the structure and machinery. But we have to also agitate, disrupt, dismantle institutional spaces that we occupy to make sure that we can see the results that we need to see, and our presence is resistance.

But I think what he's saying is actually moving beyond that, not just being present, but actually actively working to make our institutions more inclusive and more reflective of the communities that they serve. And that's something I think every single day that we are in spaces we have to think about how we do that. I remind my colleagues that we are the institution, we all comprise institutions so if we find institutional failures or shortcomings, what are we going to do to make that change? And obviously, depending on where you are situated in an institution, it may be easier, or you may have more of a higher vantage point. But nevertheless, we have a responsibility to do that and I think one of the things that's hopeful about the work we do is that we have convenings, we have spaces that we can come together and talk about strategies, and we can talk about work, not just our institutional spaces individually, but collectively as well.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: So again, in this conversation, one of the things for me is that there's a clarion call I think we have here for folks in terms of, as we think through how we help our students to navigate their various pathways, that we also see individually, interpersonally, institutionally, if we're going to do anything that is more systematic and get at what's undergirding the systemic inequities. Part and parcel of that is interrogating how racism unfolds on these campuses and that enactment of racism

or the need for anti-racism and for asset-based approaches and enhanced understandings around racially minoritized folks have to be communicated. And I like how you said CAO Dr. Bush, so that yes, there's opportunities from staff, faculty, as well as students all the way up to, as Felecia reminds us, around our boards where we have to create opportunities for disrupting racism, because these are still largely predominantly White campus environments in many cases. But you know with the Lumina Foundation's launch of this endeavor that we call REACH, REACH being racial equity for adult credentials and higher education, again, multimillion dollar effort, but again, within the short span of a couple years to try to figure out how we can address an acknowledged educational pathway needs. And especially for adult learners that are 25 to 64 years of age that are adult learners of color. So, we're at a critical moment and we know that colleges have particular choices they can make and that they have made with how they implement Guided Pathways if they're at capacity or if they've scaled it or that there's definitely, again, some fidelity. But we also need colleges to more carefully consider, think, rethink, scrutinize what the models implications for racial equity and equity writ large are. And so, there's still questions that we have to attend to in terms of how does it help? Who does it help? Who does it reach? Who needs additional supports? And so, I think while REACH is a part of rethinking that redesign and really trying to again, make scalable what we've seen as all of the promise and the good stuff with Guided Pathways that we see that there's some intensive support that's needed.

And we still have colleges that have some limited resources or need more targeted support in terms of building capacity to do the culturally sustaining practices within their pathways that are needed. But as we're going to kind of wrap up our conversation, one of the things that again I wanted us to think about was not just which, practices help? Which practices might be harmful? or maybe we don't know.

But I wanted to get your closing thoughts regarding how we build this coalition of the willing because we need to have racially conscious race forward equity initiatives. Again, very much explicitly embedded within the pathways, endeavors and framework and as we think through, before we close out what it means to be an activist leader?

I know for me, I would consider myself an activist scholar leader. I think somebody that does that is someone who understands and has very little tolerance for upholding a status quo, for turning a blind eye to inequities that just isn't going to be silent or complicit as they see racial antipathy take place, take scale. And so how do you all, and what would you suggest to our listeners in terms of some next steps? Because I really would love for them to have some takeaways from you in terms of what they could do to make a difference and be, again, an activist leader for fostering culturally responsive educational practices within their own spheres of influence. So, Rich I'll start with you and then we'll move to Felecia and then close with Ed.

Dr. Richard Reddick: I think one of the most important things we can do is build coalitions because we're often laboring in institutions where there may or may not be the support that is needed to institute change at scale. And so, what I've often reminded folks is that we shouldn't be constrained by institutional limitations, we have convenings, we have spaces, we have social media, we have platforms like Zoom and we have podcasts, we have all these ways of finding each other. And so, one of things I get to do actually today is work at a professional education program at Harvard called Bravely Confronting Racism. We're talking to about 40-50 higher education leaders across the country and in Canada. And one of the things that's most important to what we're doing is telling people that you're now part of a network that's 40 people large, but that network is part of other networks. So initially, it

may seem that you're doing the work by yourself, or you might have a very small coalition of people you're working with, but when you start trying to figure out who else is doing the work? Who is publishing work like you're doing? Who is in the academic spaces, in the scholarly spaces, and the practitioner spaces doing the work, we can do a lot to support each other in that process. And I think one of the huge benefits of social media and this sort of technology movement we're in, is that we can find each other much easier. I'm always amazed about the generation that's behind me who seems to be so able to follow things and understand what's happening in the world through the things that they're doing on social media now.

Certainly, there are downsides to it, I don't think it's the be all end all. But at least when I think about the ability to find people who are reading the same things you're reading, observing the same challenges you're observing, who are working to dismantle systems that you're trying to dismantle, it's so much easier to do it nowadays. The question, I think, is the sustainability and viability of those coalitions. When you build those coalitions over social media, sometimes I wonder how enduring they can be? And certainly there's times where it can be, but there's those times where it's like, sometimes just the work that we do face-to-face and working on a project together can be more fruitful. But nevertheless, I definitely think sustainable, anti-racist practice is really where you want to be at.

And I've seen too many people commit to the work but then lose the ability to do it because they're burned out, they can't shoulder the weight so much anymore. The question really is how do we do this work in a way that sustains us as people, but also allows us to recharge and find allyship and coconspirators with our colleagues?

Dr. Edward Bush: I would say one of the things I would implore institutions to do is to make the work manageable. So let me explain that, I think oftentimes we take in the totality of the work and when we talk about closing gaps in achievement, we talk about operating with a sense of race consciousness or anti-racist institutions, that work is really big and complex.

And I find because of the lack of expertise and capacity that exists in many of our institutions, there's simply just a lack of expertise around how to engage in that particular type of work. And also, even when there are some competencies and capacity with the institution, I think the task at hand can seem so overwhelming that it leads to a paralysis of the effort. Or you try to cover so much ground that actually you're not getting the depth in the work necessary to actually create the transformation that you're looking for.

So, my suggestion to institutions is to identify one practice or policy that is having a deleterious impact for students of color, or faculty of color. So, identify that one particular practice and say we're going to focus on changing this way in which we conduct business. So, whether it might be focusing on the passage rates of African American students in college algebra and that becomes the focus of the institution's equity work. That would go a longer way then you have in years of conversations about what it is that you should be doing as an institution, then putting your energy and effort on one thing that you know if that one thing changes it’s going to have other positive implications on the experience of the students and to improve outcomes for the students in which you try to serve. So, I would say do an audit of your practices and policies, identify one of those practices or policies that you know are having negative outcomes that oftentimes when I asked institution those questions, I also ask, how long has that policy been around?

And most people say the entire time I've been here. And so, we know that we have practices that we overlook that we don't discuss, that everyone in the institution knows that is harming students and we have not changed that practice, like we're just negligent to doing that work. So, I say identify that one thing, focus on that and when you accomplish that, move to the next.

Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher: I want to thank each of our panelists today, Dr. Felecia Commodore, Dr. Ed Busch, Dr. Richard Reddick. I think that there were many wonderful takeaways, as I've mentioned throughout our conversation, but most recently with these closing remarks that we really need to commit ourselves to having intentional approaches, to thinking about how we can remain active and engaged and fostering equity and inclusion and doing so in ways that are race forward and race conscious.

And so with that, I want to just again, thank you for your efforts and the wisdom that you shared with us today as folks think about how they structure Guided Pathways and how they seek to provide support to students, whether it be from bundling and sequencing of courses, thinking about the wraparound supports, but more wholly thinking about our credentialing attainment pathways to do so in ways that again are race conscious, race forward, and then understanding that we have racial realities on our campuses that can all too often present themselves in challenging ways for racially minoritized learners of color, and particularly those that are 25 plus.

And so, again, as an activist leader, we just encourage you to be productive disruptors in terms of understanding the essential parts of what is necessary for students to be successful. And that's not a one size fits all, but that it is encouraging dissent again, having activism in the way of how you listen and tend to student needs across the spectrum of difference. So again, we thank you so much for your time with us, and until next time, take care.

Dr. Richard Reddick: Thanks so much.

Dr. Edward Bush: Thank you for having us. Take care.