Sustainability Through the Lens of Culturally Responsive Practices in Changing Educational Landscapes

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Dr. Gianina Baker: Hello. I'm your host, Gianina Baker. I'd like to welcome you to our conversation, titled "Sustainability Through the Lens of Culturally Responsive Practices in Changing Educational Landscapes."

I'm joined today by two of our REACH Collaborative Equity Champion Consultants. We have Dr. Mara Lazda, the professor of history at Bronx Community College of the City University of New York. And we also have Dr. Mayra Padilla, who currently serves as the dean of institutional effectiveness and equity at Contra Costa College in California. I'm excited to have both of them joining us to help us reflect a little more on what we are talking about when we think of culturally sustaining practices, especially through their respective lenses, where they sit at their universities, their experiences. And so, with that, let's get started.

The first question I'd love for both of you to respond to is: How do you approach this work, that being culturally sustaining practices, culturally responsive practices? Where do you go to read or learn more about what we might term "high-impact, culturally responsive practices, and what resources have been helpful to you or are you looking forward to reading?

Dr. Mayra Padilla: Thank you. It's always a pleasure to be here, learn so much from all of the work that you all are doing, Gianina. And I'm excited to hear about what Dr. Lazda has got to share, as well. I wanted to start by sharing some classics. My work is really grounded and some of Gloria Ladson-Billings seminal papers on educational debt and cultural relevancy. I also often look for Laura Rendón in the "Sentipensante," educating the entire student and the community and having an asset lens.

Some of the work that our community college is doing has shifted from just cultural relevancy to culturally responsive practices, and that's really the understanding that students bring in assets. And that they can co-create curriculum and co-create learning spaces, so that has been really important. When folks want to know why race matters, I site Dr. Cheryl Ching. I love her paper and I think it's a really great resource as we navigate spaces where there's always a question about whether or not we want to center race in the equity conversation. Contra Costa Community Colleges and HSI — I often stay abreast of the work that Excelencia in Education is doing, the best practices that they are conferring at the end of the year.

Gina Garcia on liberatory practices and shifting from having an enrolling lens, enrolling Latina students to actually serving Latina students. And I attend the AHSIE Conference, the Alliance for Hispanic Serving Institution Educators. Because one of our populations of interest is our African American students, teaching men of color that Dr. Harris and Wood have done an exceptional job there. All of our incoming instructors actually take their course as part of our onboarding practice.

And then I try to stay abreast of what's happening with tribal colleges. Of course the Office of Community College Research and Leadership at the University of Illinois and the University of Pittsburgh. And I want to also give a big shout-out to the Center for Urban Education. Both the Center for Race and Equity also have resources, and one of the papers I use quite a bit as an acting equity-by-design and our equity pathway work that Dr. Bensimon put forward.

And so those are some of the classics that I go to from time to time as I'm drawing on ideas and thinking about practices that we want to implement. And so, one of the things I want to just share around this is that it's important for every school to have a set of these kinds of learnings that they cite, and that folks that are developing our pathways are familiar with so that we're using shared language and a similar definition. And so, I hope some of those are exciting for you to hear about and go out and look for them. But I also just want to say that this work is continuously evolving and so the classics are not enough. Paying attention to what's going on in terms of the social political landscape is really important, and so being abreast of how different communities are being impacted in the current context is *really* critical.

Dr. Gianina Baker: Wow. Tons of resources. I hope people were listening and if they did not, go back, write those down, because you're absolutely right. Those are very, very, very seminal pieces to much of this work. And you've heard it probably in other podcasts that we've done in other briefs, in the blogs that are coming up, a lot of these topics will be discussed even further. Thank you for not just sharing the resources but also how you are thinking about, not just the foundations to your work, but how you might then use them in the process as you're, like you said, exploring different ideas, different questions. That's helpful.

Dr. Mara Lazda: That's a wonderful foundation. And I was thinking, I hope that we can share kind of a bibliography along with all of these podcasts, because I certainly like to review several of the sources already mentioned. I think it's worth giving another shout-out to OCCRL, because it's work has been so instrumental in

challenging me and making me reflect on our goals as people are committed to culturally responsive teaching and practices.

I am going to start with some classics, too. I mean, Geneva Gay, who had a series of books. We kind of see the evolution of terms of our reflecting on approaches thinking about multicultural education and ethnic studies and now really embracing culturally responsive teaching. And I think within this body of work, and even my approach to college, I find myself thinking about culturally responsive teachings, and I'm a faculty member. I'm also involved in other offices and other committee work and other organizational work on campus. And so, I spent a lot of my time thinking about how I can integrate culturally responsive teaching in my in my classroom. And then reflecting on what those terms mean. And so, in Gay's work, I kind of latched on this idea of thinking about as, you know, as transparency, right? Transparency and what we're teaching, why we're teaching it, and what is the goal. What does that have to do with culturally responsive teaching or practices? I think we've become increasingly aware that we have to rethink the purpose of education, and into what kind of a structure are we trying to prepare our students? So, if we're not trying to make the structure itself, or the societal structure, more culturally responsive and disassemble some of these continual inequities. That's where I think transparency comes in and what I've taken from Gay's work and kind of being transparent in all of our interactions with our students.

I also have been informed by Bettina Love's work and look forward to reading the "Punished for Dreaming," that'll be coming out. It emphasizes culturally responsive practices as seeing the student as the whole person. Someone who doesn't just appear on campus without bringing a lot of previous experiences and skills and learning, and so that work has certainly been instrumental.
And then I also need to reflect on my own role and what I represent to the students as a white faculty member. I think in my culturally responsive teaching, I have to be transparent about my own position. And so there, Ruby Hamad's "White Tears, Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color speaks to me in many ways in that it's a history. It looks at the history of white feminist roles and then then I would say white faculty (members') roles in perpetuating equity, even while claiming social justice positions and then actually provides the vocabulary approaches with which to engage in culturally responsive teaching in an aware way. And that goes back to circling back to transparency.

Dr. Gianina Baker: Even more resources that you just gave out and you were vulnerable in that moment, and I appreciate that. I think that the more that we can do that, the more we see each other in a different way and really can work to build

on culturally responsive practices to make them more culturally sustaining. And I hope that the listeners or state leads that have been listening to this work and been a part of this Reach Collaborative work from very beginning recognize both of the authors that you all had just discussed. We didn't plan this, but you discussed them in a way that we sorted them out with some of those definitions from Gay, from the other ones that you just discussed, so I'm hoping that people are reflecting on those earlier conversations and to where they are now, right? With some of the podcasts and briefs and blogs and thinking about where they've started, what's helped them progress with maybe some additional resources that will help them in that, and find some ways to be vulnerable with people that they trust around them to really push this work forward.

And so, as we've been talking through this topic and around sustainability, we know that it is *very* difficult to do this work, and in the middle of a pandemic. And maybe as we're coming out of this post-pandemically, Mara, I wonder, what are some of the ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, and how has it affected our BIPOC adult learners and their education?

Dr. Mara Lazda: I think we're probably pretty well aware of the general statistics about how the pandemic affected communities of color disproportionately. I mean, just I looked up a couple of statistics to share that even though, for example, Black people make up 13% to 15% of the population, about 27% of the COVID cases affected this community. And then we know that the rate of death was about 2.5% higher than that of white people. From that perspective, the perspective of the illness itself and the pandemic itself, we see these communities disproportionately affected. But of course, as we know, just the pandemic and much broader destabilizing and harmful, and I should say trauma-inducing effects on those communities that then the students are bringing to campus. They're trying to, you know, "get back to normal," which I think we all realize is not what we are trying to do, nor should we try to do, because I think one of the things that, as we know, that COVID exposed was how normal was unjust and equitable as far as access to health support services, who is on the front lines and so forth. So, the point is that even though, you know, at least in our campus, too, there's a discussion of "returning" isn't quite using normal, but I think we want to think about transforming.

And so, I do want to mention one article that was in the journal *Transformative Learning* and Mattea Marquart and Johanna Báez. And I'll just read the title because I think it has these key words that we should keep foremost in our minds in thinking about our next phase, or the next stage, in developing education, especially for BIPOC adult learners, and that title is "Recommitting to trauma-

informed teaching principles to support student learning: An example of a transformation in response to the coronavirus pandemic." So, I mean the keywords here is the is the *recommitting*, the trauma-informed and transformation. And I think we have to have to kind of go back to our original maps of how we wanted to inform pathways of education and to realize that there have been these disruptions that continue that our students are still negotiating. So, whether that is personal trauma that they experience that they're carrying with them into the classroom; whether it's losing their economic stability and still struggling with that; whether it's restructuring their family. I see all my students negotiating with that on a daily basis. And in particular, I think in terms of family support and family responsibilities that have shifted, because those kinds of outside responsibilities and commitments have always been a part of their education and their experience. But it is, I think, even more pronounced in, I'll just say the ongoing COVID pandemic.

Dr. Gianina Baker: Thank you. What you were talking about definitely hits home to some of my own research interests, and I hadn't heard of that article, so I can't wait to check that one out. There's a lot to that. Recommitting kind of implies that there is a commitment in the beginning, so, in that space, let's go back to that original commitment and see what we said we were going to do for our students in terms of pathways and education, so I'm really excited to check that out. I might go read that as soon as we get done. Mayra, did you want to add anything?

Dr. Mayra Padilla: I think from my vantage point, I think that this idea that a one-size-fits all, we should treat *everyone* the same was *really* broken through during the pandemic. And the other myth is we can't do things very quickly as old archaic academic institutions. And yet, when we were forced in that context to shift our pedagogy into a different modality, we were forced to deploy resources at scale. Both of those things we managed to do as educators.

And so, the question for me really is, why does it take an external force to shift this into action. But now that we've know we can do it, I think the recommitment for me is around maintaining this idea that a one-size-fits-all approach has *never* worked and will not work moving forward, and so we really need to commit to a dynamic way of teaching, both through modalities but also through culturally responsive practices. We know those work. There's lots of data to suggest that that's really important. And then this piece around providing students basic needs is *critical*. We know that our social structures are broken, and so if it requires us to mend those through our educational system, then that is something we need to be prepared to do, at scale. So, for me, that sort of radical hope idea is seen in our response to COVID. And so I'm *really* hopeful that we continue that commitment

forward. So, thank you, Mara, for that beautiful landscape that you shared with us and that reference. I also haven't read it, so I'm excited to read it as well.

Dr. Gianina Baker: The points that you're making I hope really resonate with listeners because I think this is what other people and institutions are thinking about, right? They're trying to make sense of what we've been through to help set this path forward.

In terms of the REACH collaborative work that we've been doing, much of what it has been has been sitting around providing technical assistance, thought leadership to our state leads as they work with the community colleges in their respective states to increase the credential attainment of racially minoritized adult learners. And so, as I know you just talked about Dr. Padilla, there's not a one-size approach to fit all. There is this insistence on working to scale practices, especially really good practices that we know work, and we do know some of those now, right? And we've even done some of them within a pandemic. And so, the question to you both is, what should state leads consider when working to scale and sustain guided pathways and/or culturally responsive practices? And just to note here, for some of the listeners, when we were prepping for this conversation, each of them were able to identify inequities that were persistent for them that they weren't wanting to potentially share here. And so, Mayra, I think you talked about equity bylaws and shared governance as two distinct examples, and Mara, you discussed institutional supports or equity and administrative practices, particularly the hiring of students. And so, might you both go into a bit more detail for our listeners?

Dr. Mayra Padilla: So, I am an administrator. I'm a dean, and so I get to have the privilege of looking through a slightly different lens. I have to look at scale, at what's happening at the institution because of my role. However, I think that most folks are looking at their scope of influence, whether you're a faculty member or a classified professional working around guided pathways. In a state leads (environment), we're looking at a system kind of from the outside. And so, I think it's really important to bring all those perspectives into the mix, and we have accreditation and we have strategic planning that happens at our institutions. And I often like to say if it is not cited in a strategic plan, the likelihood that we're going to move to scale is very, very small, because the strategic plan and the way that we respond to our self- evaluation and our accreditation self-study *really* set the priorities for an institution. And so, I think one of the things that state leads can help leaders at an institution that are trying to scale guided pathways is to say, did it make it into those documents?

The other place where I think is a very powerful lever is in our program reviews. Every program has to do one of these for accreditation, and what are we asking faculty and program leads to spend their time assessing is really important. If we really think that we want to shift our educational system through a guided pathways framework lens, is the program review organized in a way that folks can speak to the different pillars and can actually look to see if they're making progress and a really easy tool? I'm sort of playing around with our program review redesign right now in our planning committee and thinking, can we put just a laundry list of initiatives that the college is already investing in or that our guided pathways money is investing in and say, as a program, are you participating in any of these best practices, which we are *already* investing in if you're seeing disproportionate impact, in particular in our BIPOC populations? And so thinking about the scale of adoption and all of our milestones, are those embedded in the program review so that folks are really accountable for having to meet those, and that we are sending the laundry list of resources we're already investing in so the folks are not having to scratch their heads to figure out how to that. That we're connecting the dots between what the institution is investing in and how those apply in program level.

And the idea around scope of influence, in particular for faculty. One of the conversations I was recently having is when we went remote for COVID response, we were to implement in the state of California, becoming an effective online instructor, which had lots of equity practices embedded in it. And because everyone had to go remote, all instructors had to take it. And so, it was *really* a great way of scaling some equity practices across institutions and thinking about, okay, so now individual faculty members are learning practices or scaling their practices and thinking, that's at an individual level. But as a faculty member, if I am a department chair, what am I doing at the department to ensure that *all* of my faculty and mostly community colleges have to contend with the fact that we have a *high* percentage of faculty that are adjunct. And so, how are we scaling at that level at the department level, those practices using your bylaws to really be clear: We are going to be race-centered. We are going to make sure that everyone that works in this department has these particular equity-minded skillsets that they've learned through extra professional-development offerings, right? We're going to make sure that the equity initiatives, whether they're through tutoring or professional development or structural changes, the culturally relevant pedagogy— all of those things are outlined and that we're making sure that in our departments, those are values that we have and that center how we want to do the work in that area. And so those are just some of the ideas from my administrative lens that are power levers that could really help with scale.

Dr. Mara Lazda: So, I think we're a good pairing here because I don't think of the big institutional (picture). I don't have to be and am not accountable for the big institutional picture. I'm accountable for my individual interactions on the ground, which makes me think about the big institutional picture. So. I mean, I've been thinking a lot about this part of this conversation of pathways and credit for prior learning, things about the connection between the students' experience up to getting to campus or getting to the classroom. But then I've been thinking more about, okay, what happens *when* they get to campus or when they get, whether it's physical or virtual, and when and when they get to their academic component, how then are we supporting equity or what structures are they encountering that remove barriers to inequity and, in particular, that makes me think about the role even of space. When they arrive, how does accessibility play an issue, or even just the maintenance of the space and what that says to students about, as a belonging, I think, as a part of culturally responsive practices and learning.

And so, here's my micro, micro example that I've encountered and that is about student hiring and bureaucracy. So, I was thinking, can bureaucracy be equitable in some ways and in regards to culturally sustaining. So, here's my example, my micro, micro example, is that in my role as a faculty member, I also hire tutors for our department, and I was kind of disheartened, shocked to learn from the students' perspective what navigating the hiring process, the negotiating of schedule, the request, *incredible* request for documentation of various aspects of the student, or you know, let's just say in inquiries that also require fees. And say my institution requires an $80 fee for fingerprinting for certain members. So, my point here really is what does that communicate or what are we communicating as an institution to say that to me, institutionalizing yet another barrier that is inconsistent with our stated mission of reevaluating space, reevaluating structures, reevaluating curriculum as equitable. That's kind of my point in bringing up such a micro example that is something that I continue to bring up in various contexts is to take a broad lens in all of these levels that the students encounter and making sure that they support, ultimately, our culturally responsive (outlook), not just teaching, but really experience across the board.

Dr. Mayra Padilla: And if I may, the changing landscape reference is not just related to having to go through COVID and now the transition out of COVID, hopefully soon. But it's also around the phenomena in higher ed, in which leaders don't really last long in our educational systems. We have a revolving door of presidents, vice presidents, and, oftentimes, deans, with faculty that are tenured and carry the history of the institution. And so, for me, it's really important that to scale and sustain practices, we are also having leaders that are coming in with

systems, thinking through a race-equity lens. There are now resources which can help us think through how do our policies and practices disproportionately impact particular groups on campus. And do we have a practice as an institution to look at our policies and procedures to see where those disproportionate impacts are and what are these leaders doing to be more just in our practices?

And so, Mara, that was a great example where from a policy-review lens, change could happen, but I don't believe that our institutions are actually engaged in policy review and their long-term impacts on our populations. So that's one of the things that I think is really important: In the same way that we want our faculty to really dig into culturally responsive practices, we want our leaders to be really equity-minded in how we set policy.

The other thing I just wanted to mention briefly in terms of sustainability is, Mara, you also talked about being self-reflective, and I think the other conversation that I had recently with a faculty member was she believed that she should not have to do this kind of deep work at work. Racial-equity work triggers a lot of personal-development growth. By necessity, you have to be self-reflective and we have to see where our blind spots are. And we have to really shift our old ways of thinking and begin to see things through a much broader lens that allows us to see, again, that one-size-fits-all approach is not conducive to what we say we want, which is equality of outcomes.

And so, I think that the other place that I often get pushback is this place around, is this professional development or is this personal development, and is it appropriate to do personal development in a higher ed institution? And that's a conversation that is hard to answer. I mean, you can probably guess where I weigh in. But I will say this: Our students don't have the luxury of choosing whether they engage in personal or professional development in order to make it through higher ed. They must do both. And they have to go through growing pains and through acculturation in institutions that were not made for them. And so, my question back to folks who ask that is, why are we privileging you in this space and not our students. Because of that professional line, does that give you a privilege that we can't offer our students yet? And that's a question I'm asking. I'm leaving it open, but I do think that it's an important thing for us to bring into the conversation.

Dr. Mara Lazda: If I could just jump in. I'll turn it at the same time, like, the big picture. Like pulling back and an individual level. To me, there's two kind of terms they want to throw into this conversation also, and that is about accountability. So, I think you know this part of our conversation I'm thinking about the institutional accountability for culturally responsive practices, right? I mean, that's kind of

where we're going with the pilot, as you mentioned, policy review. How are *we* accountable or how are the administrators accountable for what we're talking about at a teaching level?

And the other term that I think I wrestle with or that I have problems with, I should say, is resilience. And it kind of maybe goes to what Mayra was talking about how I don't want it. I know I as a faculty member don't want to do it or don't think I should do this work here, and you're shifting the responsibility, really, to the student. And that's the same, I think, when we're not willing to review and reflect, and the excuse that is used is that, oh, well, you know, we ask our students to be resilient. But really, it's an institutional failure if that's what we're resorting to, if that makes sense. I mean, that's kind of the connection I'm trying to make about the responsibility of us as all the members of the college community to hold ourselves accountable. And then we're not using the romanticization of resilience as to not take that accountability on, to your point of not having a choice.

Dr. Gianina Baker: I'm a little upset that we haven't decided to make this longer, because the two of you at the end of this are dropping such good questions and thoughts and reflection. I mean, we could really spend another conversation on just the personal institutional accountability pieces. And working to get other responses to help answer that question. I'd love to hear how other people respond to it, because that is one that often does come up: Is this something that I should be doing on my own or is this a part of what I do in my work?

Yes, thank you both for continuing, I think, a deeper part of the conversation that is often talked about, right? We have these conversations with others, but I don't know if we've had them more broadly, especially with some of our state leads, and so, (I'm) excited to see what they are thinking about this conversation and what the discussion might, how it might take off.

You know, in previous conversations that we've had, they've been heavy, right, in just trying to talk about navigating this, some of the current state sociopolitical context — what does that even mean? And so, we've tried to have this throughline of asking a question about hope, you know, and that's why we often do this work, right? We stay and stick with it because there is this almost radical hope that we have that change can happen through the work that we're doing. And so, in wrapping up, I wonder if each of you might just say, you know, what do you see as the hope in doing racial-equity work.

Dr. Mayra Padilla: I'm going to cite two other references that I think give me hope. One is Shawn Ginwright and healing centered engagement. That made *such*

a huge impact on me. I *love* the frame of wellness for an institution and thinking about what do liberatory outcomes look like and asking that big question. It should be wellness. It should be that people are whole and healthy, and that they're living their best life with all the resources they need to contribute in a positive way to their local communities. So, having someone of his stature put that forward in an academic reference I think made a *huge* impact for me and gives me great hope that that's where we are all moving.

And the other thing that recently just completely shifted my way of thinking around racial equity is Heather McGhee's book *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together*. (The book talks about) this idea that we need to get past, she uses this metaphor of how in America, instead of integrating, some communities chose to drain their public pools so that they wouldn't have to swim with African Americans or people of other races. She's uses that in other examples to think about the cost of not doing anything or of *completely* creating boundaries around who can access resources for the public good. What that has cost everyone in America, including by Americans, and I think it's the first time I've heard it in such a way that it is breaking through these old ideas. And what gave me hope is really at the end, she's talking about multiracial coalition building. And not leaving anyone out, right? Like, we have to figure out how we do what's right for *everyone* in our community.

And it goes back to that statement I made around COVID. When we saw that we needed to better resource all students, we were able to leverage things and do them at scale. And I think that if we could take her argument and see how *not* having a culturally responsive universal learning design mentality, where we are really dynamic and giving folks what they need to be successful, is not going to get any of us where we need to be, including white America. And so having this as a way forward, for me, is a really radical hope. And in particular, during these *really* polarized political times, I think that message needs to be carried to all the ends of the United States, because if we do nothing, even in this micro-guided pathways view, if we do nothing, it costs *so* many of our students their livelihoods and their ability to transform our nation and really be who we want to be as a collective.

So healing, wellness, and moving everyone forward in a multicultural coalition, for me, is where this work needs to move.

Dr. Mara Lazda: I think that's beautifully captured and I'd like to kind of let it flow it out there and reflect on it. Just to continue along those same lines and pick up kind of on a preparation kind of kind of issue, we had to prepare for this. You know, the idea that culturally responsive teaching benefits one group over the

other, right, or you're focusing on one community over or against another, right? I too returned to this idea that it benefits *all* of us, right, and especially we can think of it through this concept of radical wellness. Radical wellness as a tool of radical self-care as a tool of social justice at our college and part of the social justice network. And we see that we have kind of put our work into three pillars of civic engagement, social justice, and radical wellness being that third pillar. And I think that is where you can do this work and be recharged. Kind of even selfishly thinking, you know, and perhaps that is also the answer to maybe the doubters or the people say, "Why do I *have* to do this work?" Well, I think *selfishly* I do this work because it is invigorating and it's uplifting, and it really is, you know, good for the entire community.

Dr. Gianina Baker: I thank you both so much. I think I leave recharged, reinvigorated, not just every time we meet, but especially from this conversation. There's so many good resources. Ginwright is close to my heart and the work that he's doing. And so, I *love* that you brought him into the conversation and really thinking about, I think we already talked about this, radical wellness. Like, what does that even mean?

Again, another podcast for another time, but we definitely need to get into that, and so, I hope you all that are listening and have enjoyed this particular episode, if you'd like to read more about these two fantastic panelists, please go to occrl.illinois.edu to read their full bios. And should you want to find out more about the Reach Collaborative and the work that we're doing to increase credential attainment of racially minoritized adult learners in six states, please go to reachcollab.org. Thank you.