

Sustaining and Advancing Racial Equity Efforts During the Pandemic

A #CCHALES Research Report

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About this Report

Amid the pandemic and calls for racial justice, we documented how equity advocates in community college sustain and advance their efforts to equitably serve racially minoritized students. Through immersed fieldwork, we collaborated and engaged with campus leaders to continue their planned and newly created race-conscious efforts under the conditions of the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, we note how campus leaders address structural and human barriers to sustaining racial equity efforts. We highlight the ways equity advocates build coalitions and solidarity around racial equity and the importance of coming together to reshape and re-envision the possibilities for community college. Through this work, we recognize that systemic inequity takes a systemic response; no individual efforts can truly impact the enduring nature of racism embedded within our educational structures. This report offers considerations to collectively address the organizational conditions, contexts, and challenges that influence the ability to improve racial equity at community colleges.

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Background & Context

Unique to California is the Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) Program, originally known as the Student Equity Policy, where all community colleges are tasked with the development of a three-year student equity plan that: a) documents the extent of inequity for specific student populations such as racial/ethnic groups, b) establishes goals and metrics to address identified equity gaps, and c) allocates policy-specific funds to create or scale-up institutional initiatives to achieve equity goals (CA Ed Code Section 78220, 2021). As the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) states, the SEA Program now seeks to advance the goal of “demolishing once and for all the achievement gaps for students from traditionally underrepresented populations” (CCCCO, Student Equity, n.d.).

Before the pandemic, various community colleges worked with the Center for Urban Education (2020) at the University of Southern California (USC) to use the SEA program and its funding to explicitly identify and address longstanding racial disparities on their campus. Through this collaboration, each campus used a race-conscious approach to formulating its three-year equity plan and proposed more novel, identity-focused, and culturally-relevant efforts to prompt organizational change. These institutions were unapologetically centering on racial equity and leveraging the SEA Program to shift, if not dismantle, existing policies, practices, and beliefs that were detrimental to students and constraining their opportunities for educational equity.

Since March 2020, there has been much disruption throughout higher education, including extended temporary pauses to on-campus life, shifts to remote work, and concerns about future budget reductions. Early in the pandemic, the CCHALES Research Collective at San Diego State University continued the efforts of the Center for Urban Education by holding conversations with over 14 equity leaders to understand how different institutions navigated the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic while attempting to address concerns for racial equity. One specific conversation in April 2020, fueled the idea for this research project. In this conversation, a dedicated yet weary champion for educational equity at the community college shared: “I feel isolated doing this equity work on campus, now doing it remotely I feel even more isolated and challenged in carrying the momentum of our efforts, online.” With a sense of frustration, this person continued, “How do I get faculty and staff to do this equity work that is seen as extra stuff now that everyone is at home?” This quote highlighted the dynamic that student equity leaders* faced across California's 116 community colleges as they quickly revised and restructured planned efforts to address student outcome inequity amid the unknowns of the pandemic.

*We note that with 116 community colleges, there is wide variation in specific title and role (dean, director, coordinator, faculty liaison) used for the person overseeing the SEA Program, we described them in this report as the “Student Equity Leader” (SEL).

As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed, without any signs of ending, amplified calls for racial justice put issues of racial inequity in higher education at the center of campus conversations. Stemming from the state-sanctioned murder of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and national racial reckoning, the Chancellor of the community college system released a “Call to Action” in June 2020. In doing so, Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley prompted all campuses to recognize the “systemic racial injustices that still exist in our country” and consider explicit ways that campuses could use their “positions of privilege, influence, and power to make a difference” (CCCCO, 2020). To add, this call to action actively sought for “colleges to take out their Equity Plans and look at them with fresh eyes...then rally the full campus to engage... [in] addressing equity and structural racism” (p. 3). Both the pandemic and calls for racial justice required community college leaders to critically examine the conditions and challenges faced by Black, Latinx, AAPI, Indigenous, and other racially minoritized groups in their educational journeys. Community college leaders were also urged to dismantle institutional barriers, in both virtual and physical forms, to allow historically marginalized communities to access equitable educational opportunities and flourish in the community college system. All of these changes significantly influence planned efforts to close equity gaps for racially minoritized students.

With the support of the College Futures Foundation, we selected four colleges across California to document and understand the immediate impact and long-term implications of the pandemic on racial equity efforts. The participating campuses were identified as crafting a race-conscious 2019-22 student equity plan and implementing efforts that addressed outcome disparities in critical areas such as progression to transfer-level math and English, transferring to a California State University or University of California campus, and timely degree completion for racially minoritized students (Felix et al., 2020). Beyond the traditional research approach, our program officer April Yee, Ph.D. empowered us to see this grant project as an opportunity to be collaborators and instigators of change by providing each of the campuses with direct support, insight, resources, tools, and encouragement to advance their efforts. Since we started the project in November 2020, nine researchers have conducted over 340 hours of virtual fieldwork across the four sites which includes participating in 80+ events such as student equity meetings, racial justice workgroups, campus-wide community conversations, debriefs with campus presidents, and other relevant activities.

Through this work, the CCHALES Research Collective documented the experiences, challenges, and successes of equity advocates as they revised, sustained, and progressed their equity efforts. This report highlights initial insights from our Advancing Racial Equity Project exploring how racial equity efforts in community college are sustained and advanced during the COVID-19 pandemic and amplified calls for racial justice. We divide the remaining report into three sections and start off by sharing findings on the conditions and challenges faced across the four campuses in trying to sustain their race-focused equity efforts. We build on this insight and outline two overarching themes with three action steps to advance racial equity efforts during the pandemic. We close the report with remarks to keep leaders on the path toward a more equitable and racially-just community college. We hope that the report and the lessons within it serve as a resource and a catalyst for action.

Insight from the Project

Our intent with this project was to actively support equity leaders across the four campuses in navigating the uncertainty of the pandemic and sustaining their racial equity efforts as best as possible. We meet with every campus on a bi-weekly basis and each campus was supported by at least two CCHALES researchers. Based on our immersed virtual fieldwork, we interacted frequently with the student equity leader as well as the campus members within the workgroup that oversees the SEA program for each of the four selected campuses. Additionally, we observed important events such as community conversations on social justice and racial equity, shared governance meetings that discussed resolutions related to supporting racial justice efforts, and other spaces that provide a broader context for each site and the conditions they experienced during the pandemic. This section builds off the first 12-months of our Advancing Racial Equity project and provides early perspectives that highlight the organizational conditions that shaped how each campus carried out its racial equity work during the 2020-21 Academic Year.

In this section, we describe four themes. These themes derived from observations and conversations bounded within individual colleges as well as across all four campuses. Our four emerging themes are structured into three sections: research observations, recommendations moving forward, and reflection prompts for the reader. Each theme provides an opportunity for equity advocates in community colleges to reflect on their own institutional context, recognize the conditions that restrict or enable racial equity work, and take action to mobilize their equity efforts to advance racial justice for students and colleagues.

Our first theme is written by Laura Juarez and explores how equity advocates work through the pandemic to sustain their efforts, describing the organizational conditions that disconnect ambitious goals for racial justice and the ability to achieve them. In our second theme, Diego A. Ceballos highlights the importance of equity workgroup members and how they are identified, selected, and retained to support and advance racial equity efforts on campus. In our third theme, Eric R. Felix identifies how varying levels of organizational support and engagement from senior leaders shape the ability of equity advocates to progress their strategies and interventions to mitigate racial inequity. In our final section, Cynthia Cordova draws on the concept of whiteness as property to demonstrate how white privilege acts as barriers and delay racial equity initiatives. These four themes capture our early insight into the conditions and context that influenced the progress of racial equity work in community college.



Ambitions and Reality: Aspiring for Tangible Transformation

Observations and Obstacles

Under the COVID-19 pandemic, we began to realize how unsustainable it was to preserve existing and planned racial equity efforts included within campus equity plans. Although each of the four campuses sought to bring to reality their proposed vision for educational equity under their 2019-2022 student equity plan, everything changed with the pandemic: working from home, leading initiatives via virtual meetings, and prioritizing their health, family, and economic livelihood. In this section, we explore the tension between setting ambitious goals for racial justice during the pandemic and the factors that shape how campuses work to achieve them. The insight shared comes from our observations at Quetzal College (QC) and their Student Equity Committee (SEC).

In the 2020-2021 academic year, the SEC committed to advancing the following equity efforts: interrogating inequities in enrollment management practices, surveying the campus climate for LGBTQ+ community members, developing an equity-focused strategic plan, and creating anti-racist seminars for faculty and staff. In trying to achieve these efforts, we noted three specific constraints that hindered progress during the pandemic: 1) limited capacity, 2) irregular engagement and participation, and 3) an increase in workload and responsibilities in the equity committee without added support or resources from the campus.

Riding the Storm: Persevering with Optimism

Since its formation, the SEC meets bi-weekly on Friday afternoons. In these Friday meetings, members gather to provide updates, announcements, and to collaborate on creating and implementing more equitable practices. In their last meeting of the 2020-2021 academic year, the committee discussed their annual progress in advancing their equity goals. In this last meeting, Alberto—leader of the Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) program and SEC Chair at QC—opened up conversations by sharing that some colleagues in the committee had expressed that their goals were “great, but that they were too ambitious.” He added that it might appear that significant progress was not made with the goals outlined for the year but there was some progress made. Alberto’s remarks highlight the dichotomy between the committee’s espoused goals to improve racial equity and their capacity to achieve them. In particular, these end-of-year comments illustrated the commitment and motivation to work towards racial justice, but did not consider the feasibility and sustainability of these planned efforts under the pandemic. Furthermore, the thoughts shared by QC committee members at reinforced the tension felt between establishing bold goals to improve racial equity, and the individual and collective time, energy, and capacity to progress and achieve them.

To illustrate the challenges and deliberate efforts Quetzal College faced amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Phillip Jones, a faculty in Humanities, offered the metaphor of a ship battling the storm. He stated, “I don’t think you can correct or renovate a ship during a storm but I am happy we managed to change a little during a storm. We are going in a good direction.” Oftentimes, doing equity work at QC during a global pandemic felt like steering a ship during a chaotic storm. Like a ship going through a storm, equity work was grueling and unpredictable given the ongoing pandemic and national calls for racial justice. Still, the work carried on and incremental changes were made through the SEC., Despite feeling tired and overwhelmed, we observed how members of the committee continued to preserve institutional efforts, trying their best to not let the promise of educational equity sink in the treacherous waters.

Although the SEC did not fully achieve the goals that the committee had set, what remained was an unwavering dedication to the cause and a deeply rooted level of optimism to continue their racial equity efforts. Phillip mentioned he was content with their progress even though goals were not completely achieved. Dean Wendy Brown added to this sentiment, sharing “we may not have gotten exactly to the actual work we had to do, but the overall intent of moving the college forward has happened.” Both members were satisfied with their progress even though their goals were not achieved. In their eyes, any progress was a step forward and deserved recognition.

The Student Equity Committee at Quetzal College set many ambitious goals with the intention of enacting transformational change on campus for minoritized students. They aimed high but often found themselves with a limited capacity to fully meet their goals despite their best efforts. Still, they remained optimistic about the future of the college and the work that they were able to accomplish during the pandemic. This highlights the reality campus advocates face while working to advance equity for racially minoritized students. SEC members’ experiences show the factors and forces that may arise to hinder or progress their work. In these instances, optimism is key as SEC members recognize the tall order of advancing equity work on campus as they move towards the next academic year. The comments from equity workgroup members serve as a reminder that equity work is never complete. Community colleges (like other educational institutions) often reflect what is happening in society, making the process of advancing racial equity a fluid and ongoing task.



Priorities and Periphery

As with most equity committees in community college, members at Quetzal support equity efforts through volunteer or service-based roles. Staff, faculty, and administrators take on equity work as an additional commitment, at the periphery of their primary employment responsibilities. To preserve their jobs, many SEC members mentioned feeling overwhelmed by emerging responsibilities. As SEA members sought to maintain and prioritize their primary work responsibilities, the surging pandemic frequently interfered with their ability to fully commit and fulfill their equity-related committee initiatives. As such, the added labor of the SEC often served as a hindrance to the progression of the committee's established goals. With limited time and capacity to focus on equity efforts, any new or existing effort on campus became difficult to meet.

Although SEC goals became challenging to meet amid the COVID-19, these objectives were never fully abandoned by SEC members. In doing so, SEC members often reflected on the ability or inability to meet SEC goals for Quetzal College. Scott, representing faculty in the Social Sciences, shared that his intentions of contributing to advancing the committee's goals were delayed by his need to prioritize his classes, making sure the content translated to online instruction and adequately addressed students' needs. His priorities were focused mainly on the classes he taught and then whatever limited time or capacity that he had was focused on the SEC pursuits. Similarly, Melissa expressed that due to work responsibilities she had not been able to attend meetings or support the work being done in the SEC. She mentioned that having SEC meetings on Friday afternoons made it difficult to be energized and engaged to discuss equity efforts. She went on to share that racial equity efforts were very important and that the committee should consider meeting during the summer when the demands of the academic school year slow down. Carol added that although the goals were not completely met, she had a desire to continue them into the next semester. The member's interest in the continuation of these efforts demonstrates it is not a lack of interest or desire, rather, it is a lack of adequate time and capacity to progress equity goals, as an additional task, within their already limited availability to work during the pandemic.

Protect Yourself to Persevere

As volunteers serving on the SEC, members have a set of expectations to meet as integral elements of the institution's equity efforts. For example, their primary roles involve attending bi-weekly meetings and advancing their equity goals. As several committee members had mentioned, adhering to their committee responsibilities becomes an issue when their capacity is stretched thin. Limited capacity and a heavy workload in a virtual environment, during a global pandemic, and national calls for racial justice made the work too difficult to sustain. Speaking about the dynamic between established goals and the realities to achieve them, Harvey Smith, the assessment and accessibility coordinator on campus, expressed the need to set boundaries as a committee in terms of what is a reasonable amount of work to complete. Like his colleagues, Harvey found himself behind on his committee work as a result of these efforts being on the periphery of his formal role and responsibilities. The request for setting boundaries serves as an indicator that equity committees should reassess their goals to align with the true capacity of members, especially during the pandemic when people must prioritize their health, family, and economic livelihood.

Recommendations and Reflections

Ultimately, these observations highlight some of the forces inhibiting the progress of racial equity efforts at Quetzal College. The factors that limited the SEC's ability to advance racial justice efforts included setting ambitious goals without considering the time and capacity of committee members, especially during a pandemic.

We acknowledge that it is an unsustainable expectation to set the tone with ambitious goals in the middle of a pandemic, with national calls for racial justice, overt anti-Blackness, anti-Asian hate crimes, a presidential election, and a capital insurrection amongst other things. All of these factors may impact the member's ability to perform their jobs, especially for those directly impacted by many of these realities. These factors are incredibly important to consider when analyzing how goal-setting and goal-achievement are impacted by external factors with emotional consequences for educational practitioners. For this reason, the leads of equity committees should consider the emotional, physical, and mental capacity of their members in regard to supporting equity efforts given the national political climate and the devastating nature of a global pandemic.

Leading equity work involves the emotional, physical, and mental capacity of everyone. Most importantly, the impact that this type of labor has on people affects individuals differently depending on how their identities are tied to privilege, power, and/or oppression. As a committee, it is important to collectively and consistently discuss what everyone's needs and capacity are. Doing so could support the student equity leader in understanding how to best support committee members along with how to set and delegate feasible goals to improve equity. To work towards tangible transformative change, there also need to be conversations within the committee about the individual and collective capacity to carry out the workload given.

Checking in with members individually to gauge their ability to do this work is vital to creating feasible, sustainable goals that do not overwhelm or disregard members' lived experiences in and outside the committee. Furthermore, we suggest establishing mid-semester check-in meetings to assess progress, evaluate needs, and learn how to support members. Mid-semester check-ins can provide an opportunity for change to accommodate members' immediate needs, ultimately, in support of advancing committee goals.

Overall, members of the SEC face challenges and forces that delay their ability to progress their equity goals and responsibilities within the committee. For example, time constraints, limited capacity, and the conditions under the pandemic contributed to emotional, physical, and mental exhaustion for many. We observed the ways that setting ambitious goals for racial justice may have actually overwhelmed many SEC members and ultimately overworked their capacity resulting in many efforts not being achieved. Nonetheless, the committee's desire to carry their unachieved equity efforts into the new academic year serves as an indicator of their interest in progressing these goals. To this end, we recommend that moving forward, especially when creating race-conscious and justice-oriented goals, it is crucial to reassess goals, capacity, and to be intentional in how responsibilities are

delegated. Most importantly, as a committee, the mental health and wellness of individual members should be prioritized. Doing equity work requires emotional, physical, and mental labor. Enabling committee members to set boundaries as they engage in equity work is imperative to sustain and protect individuals invested in advancing equity efforts on a volunteer/service basis.

Reflections

In order to sustain racial equity efforts, community colleges must first seek to fulfill and sustain their equity advocates. Ways to assess capacity and commitment:

- How can equity efforts be delegated within the workgroup in sustainable and feasible ways to prevent member burnout?
- How can the equity workgroup capture all the efforts, individually and collectively, being done to highlight the existing workload and avoid being overburdened with new tasks without additional resources and support?
- How do we provide support to workgroup members who volunteer to take on this equity work and help preserve their emotional, physical, and mental wellness?



Building the Coalition: Intentionally Selecting Equity Advocates for Race Work

Observations and Obstacles

This theme explores the composition and characteristics of the equity workgroups within our four community colleges and the dynamics within them that shape how racial equity work can move forward. Across our project campuses and larger community college system, there is wide variation in the structure, composition, and the number of people involved in the workgroups that oversee the Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) program. An “equity workgroup” is constructed depending on the rules, traditions, cultures, and governance approaches embedded within each institution (Felix & Ramirez, 2020). These institution-specific norms then shape the type of leadership structure (single or tri-chair model), formal arrangement (embedded within shared governance, ad-hoc workgroup), membership size (can range between 10 and 24 members for our sites), frequency of meetings (biweekly, monthly), and most importantly how much influence and authority they have to enact change towards racial equity.

Drawing on our collaboration with Quetzal College and their Student Equity Committee (SEC), we recognized that there were different levels of intentionality when identifying, selecting, and retaining workgroup members. At Quetzal College we noticed a strict adherence to shared governance rules, which limited member selection to be based only on predetermined cross-campus representation. We argue that racialized organizational change within institutions of higher education requires equity workgroup members to have a certain set of skills, competencies, and experiences that work to maximize the possibilities of reforms and use policy to address racial inequity. This type of transformative approach requires campuses to change from a constituency-based selection process to an equity-based competency. From our observations, we urge community college leaders to identify and select members for the SEC beyond the basics of constituency rooted within shared governance, but instead to focus on potential members’ competence, commitment, and capacity to engage in and advance race work on campus.

Identifying Equity Advocates to Carry-Out Goals of Racial Equity

Through bi-weekly observations of Quetzal College’s equity workgroup meetings over the last academic year, we noticed how challenges emerged and impacted their ability to sustain their equity efforts. These challenges include not meeting Spring 2021 semester goals, limited engagement from members, and the equity director being overwhelmed by his various leadership roles. Many of these limitations may have been created or exacerbated by the current COVID-19 pandemic. In a Spring 2021 conversation with the student equity leader, he reflected on how the committee members struggled to remain engaged, and on how the group can be more race-conscious and attentive to issues of racial justice on campus and in the surrounding community. These reflections were brought

up again in a conversation six months later where committee chair Alberto Jimenez suggested that the lack of engagement from the committee could be caused by members' limited abilities to connect to issues of equity and race. Given these strains on the SEC's capacity to sustain focus on equity efforts, our research team seldom saw the group at Quetzal College build rapport, check in with members, or facilitate discussions on race and equity to gauge members' competencies. A review of SEC meeting agendas showed that the committee would generally begin with approval of minutes and then dive right into the "business of equity" without considering the ways the pandemic and general strain on time and effort for people hindered their ability to carry on the intended race work. Additionally, as the meetings started, we noticed the usual roll call to check for attendance and make sure that colleagues from across campus were represented in the meeting.

At Quetzal, like many community colleges in the state, membership was driven by constituency group representation, where there were predetermined slots for administration, faculty, and classified staff to fill. The adherence to a constituency-driven approach was based on their participatory governance rules and regulations where equity workgroup members were "assigned or appointed to governance bodies as representatives of specific constituencies." When we worked with the college the equity committee was comprised of one director that serves as chair, a vice president, several predetermined campus representatives, and most recently one faculty or professional from each of the affinity groups that support racially minoritized community members. This illustrates how the committee intentionally sought to create a "cross-representation of campus-wide constituent groups."

In theory, this approach helps to avoid silos, prompt collaboration, and ensure engagement for all areas of campus. Although representation is satisfied, there is a lack of intentionality in pairing who the members are with their experiences, competencies, and capacity available to push equity efforts forward. Our earlier work references this type of practice as a "Noah's Ark" approach to committee selection, where "the priority was to have two people from different sectors of the campus serving on decision-making bodies" (Felix, 2021a, p. 13). Broadly speaking this approach limits the change that can occur as equity workgroup members are filling a seat as a requirement as opposed to utilizing a personal or professional passion and/or desire to create institutional change for the campus. Building off these observations, we offer actionable steps to address the challenges of membership representation and level of competencies, capacity, and willingness that equity workgroups across the community college system face when assigned to advance and achieve racial equity.

Recommendations and Reflections

Working with four geographically diverse campuses, we observed the extent of workgroup variations and the impact on sustaining and progressing their racial equity work. We find that advancing equity is only as effective as the people involved to cultivate it. Knowing the expertise and competency of committee members can indicate the levels of racial equity fluency, strategic planning knowledge, and resilience towards institutional resistance. In the same way, the situated context of the collective also influences how equity efforts can advance on campus. The (mis)alignment of each member's perception of equity issues and ideal solutions will determine how well they can move collectively

towards meeting goals. As seen at Quetzal College, it is not enough to have members with strong equity competency, there needs to be a more synergetic element that leverages the equity strengths of key individuals into more collective action.

If we envision equity as a tangible product akin to human civilization's proclivity to architecture, there is always planning, designing, and constructing. In this sense, selecting the people with the appropriate competencies and expertise will have an impact on the intended structure or outcome. During a meeting with all four student equity leaders in our project, we asked about strategies to address committee turnover. Specifically, Emilio at El Rancho College argued that specific people might need to be identified and recruited to join in these equity efforts. He emphasized the need to be intentional in selecting people for equity-related tasks, "otherwise, you get the choir, we need to expand and get a campus-wide coalition." The individuals ideal for this type of institutional change should possess equity-minded competencies, can have difficult conversations about race and racial disparities, and are also able to interrogate the stale practices institutions traditionally have had towards equity. When ideas are met with resistance, students are impacted, which can discourage people from pushing for changes. Therefore, the commitment and willingness to drive change are critical characteristics for equity advocates to possess in these workgroups and be able to leverage.

As we close this section, we urge educational leaders to consider the importance of recruiting and appointing members to equity workgroups based on their commitment to racial equity, capacity to support intended organizational change, and competency in identifying and addressing systemic institutional inequities. As campuses continue their equity efforts, they need to consider how they can move away from the "Noah's Ark" approach and center their organization on balancing constituencies and competencies. This is not to suggest that individuals not be included in equity work or be excluded from participating in conversations around race-specific strategies but that those who can do the heavy lifting be positioned in a purposeful way. We see this as an "and" conversation, prompting campuses to work within the rules and routines of governance but also consider ways to identify and select equity workgroup members that not only represent certain areas of campus but have the skills and willingness to help plan and lead organizational change (Felix, 2021b).

Reflections

As we highlighted, the organization and composition of an equity workgroup are critical to advancing race work. Campuses should annual inventory their existing committee characteristics to consider the capacity of the membership as well as who is missing that may enhance the group dynamic and what can be achieved through it. Campuses can consider the following questions and how recruiting and retaining equity-minded members can benefit your goals for racial equity:

- Within shared governance rules of committee participation, how do we also intentionally select members that can support and enhance the work to advance racial equity?
- How does your student equity workgroup build the skills and knowledge of existing members around racial equity to progress this work?
- How do organizational structures and practices on your campus help or hinder work to advance racial equity for students?

Get In Formation: The Active Role of Campus Leaders

Observations and Obstacles

One of the most important aspects observed during our fieldwork was the active engagement of senior leaders and the relationship held with the equity advocates at each site. Across the four campuses, senior administrators, including the president, demonstrated a variation in their support and involvement concerning the racial equity work being done. As our fieldwork progressed, we began to make distinctions between engagement types. We categorized presidential engagement with racial equity efforts into three areas: 1) absent, 2) drop-in, and 3) continuous. Early in our project, we described this as the (in)visibility of campus leaders, in that some sites lacked any presence of senior administration, others dropped in from time to time, and one site had continuous active participation from their president. Each engagement type influenced how equity workgroups navigated their race work during the pandemic and shaped their ability to move forward knowing that they were empowered and supported by campus leadership.

Absent. At La Sirena College, equity advocates shared how they perceived a lack of involvement from their president. They felt that their leadership was reluctant to support their endeavors to improve racial equity. At this campus, it was routine for the equity workgroup to document the efforts being done by the group and individuals within it to advance equity and share it with the president. Rather than attend these meetings or build rapport with key equity advocates, the president sought to get written share-outs on what the equity workgroup was doing. The absence of senior leaders from these important spaces where the equity work happens left advocates wondering what support and level of commitment were coming from its campus leadership. At La Sirena, the equity workgroup was tasked with creating a call to action to mobilize the community to support “racial equity and social justice” across the campus. When discussing how to garner buy-in from the campus community, one member asked, “will we be given support by the president to carry out this work?” Another member shared they were “frustrated, by the lack of support and encouragement” from their president and felt their time and energy on these efforts would be misguided without a clear commitment from them.

Drop-in. For two campuses, the president and senior leaders would engage with the equity workgroup intermittently to provide updates, check-in on the progress of equity efforts, and request the group to take on new more urgent tasks during the pandemic. Within this drop-in category, we noticed the ways senior leaders attended meetings to a) charge the workgroup with more tasks or b) share progress on expanding capacity to do existing and new work. Simply put, these drop-in visits either increased the workload or lightened it for the members of the equity workgroups. For example, the president and vice-president at Quetzal College would attend the equity workgroup meetings to call on members to take on urgent “DEI work” at the periphery of the essential/core functions of

advancing racial equity. We noticed how the equity workgroup at this campus became a “catch-all committee” for anything related to equity; increasing the responsibility of the workgroup without providing more resources or support.

Meanwhile, at Magnolia College, the president and vice president of student services (VPSS) engaged with the equity workgroup, but most of the time it was to provide updates on how they were supporting equity-related campus efforts. For example, they dropped in to report they were expanding efforts to diversify faculty hiring, creating “Community Conversations” to discuss racial injustice over the academic year and sharing news related to increasing resources and personnel to oversee the Student Equity Office and all the recently created justice-oriented projects since the pandemic. At this site, the senior leaders recognized the need for added capacity and resources, especially as the equity workgroup was charged with more initiatives amid the amplified calls for racial justice. Similarly, when the president and vice president of student services attended these equity spaces, we noted how they sought to affirm and recognize the racial equity work being done by the members. One exchange exemplifies this where Magnolia College’s VPSS shared, “I want to make sure I am supporting you and everything you are taking on” and one equity advocate quickly responded, “even if you aren’t here [in these meetings], your support is always present.” Thus, the drop-in engagement from presidents and senior leaders provided varied results. At Magnolia College, drop-in engagement led to check-ins that affirmed their labor and provided tangible resources to progress their race work. In contrast, at Quetzal College we documented how these drop-in engagements seemed to add more tasks and responsibilities to the workgroup, without additional resources or capacity. In this regard, the increased workload led to equity advocates feeling overburdened and unable to fully achieve their intended goals.

Continuous. At El Rancho College, the president and senior leaders were actively involved in meetings and discussions around racial equity. The president took on the role of facilitating meetings and building a coalition of community members, which included students, staff, faculty, and was aimed at working towards addressing issues of racial injustice and anti-Blackness. Over the first several months of our collaboration, we recognized the robust involvement and participation from campus members, following the pattern that their senior leaders exemplified by being committed and engaged in this work as well. Speaking with the equity advocates at this site, they mentioned their personal and professional motivation to address issues of anti-Blackness. As an example, they created different workgroups to interrogate and improve the institutional commitment, campus culture, and classroom experience for Black students. Having senior leaders attend the workgroup regularly created an environment in which anyone could share existing or emerging equity concerns with those who held the most power. The continuous participation of campus leaders kept them accountable not only for being aware of the issues facing students but acknowledging their role and ability to take action.

Recommendations and Reflections

The involvement and engagement of senior leaders is one factor shaping how racial equity advances in community colleges. We documented how differing levels of interaction between campus presidents and vice presidents led to equity advocates being able to easily progress their race work or feel overtasked and undersupported. Lacking engagement from senior leaders, the absent category highlighted how equity advocates felt alone and isolated in their racial equity efforts and described how limited they felt in progressing the equity work without visible leadership or institutional support. The drop-in engagement was seen as an opportunity to inhibit and promote the equity efforts on campus, by either tasking the equity workgroup with more tasks without support or actively lightening the load through added resources and capacity. Lastly, continuous engagement allowed for senior leaders to be more aware of equity issues being addressed by the workgroup, acknowledge their position of power, and ability to take action to resolve these pressing issues. For the equity advocates in the trenches, working every day to implement efforts, there must be symbolic and material levels of organizational commitment and support.

To sustain and advance efforts that address racial disparities on campus, it is critical that campus leaders, from deans to presidents, commit to being engaged in meaningful ways with equity advocates doing the work. Active engagement from senior leaders with student equity efforts signals that the organization is committed to racialized change. This includes but is not limited to being involved in equity spaces to listen to the issues on the ground, staying accountable to what is going on at their campus, and considering ways to leverage their positional status, power, available fiscal resources to support efforts that seek to improve conditions for racially minoritized students.

Reflections

As campuses move forward with racial equity and broader DEI work, consider asking your senior leaders these questions:

- What is the relationship of senior administration to the work being done to improve racial equity? How do their involvement and engagement provide differing levels of commitment, authority, and discretion for each equity workgroup to achieve its goals?
- The equity workgroup is seeking to disrupt policies, practices, and behaviors on campus that perpetuate, if not exacerbate racial inequity, how will senior leaders be accomplices in disrupting these structures and making the campus a more equitable institution?
- As responsibilities and tasks increase for equity workgroups during the pandemic, what type of resources, capacity, and support are provided to match this added workload to ensure sustainability for equity advocates to carry out this work?
- Lastly, we simply ask you to consider where you would categorize your senior leaders based on the engagement and support received for your racial equity work?

Whiteness As Property: White Privilege and Barriers to Racial Equity

Observations and Obstacles

In June 2020, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) released a call to action urging all community colleges to rethink their equity efforts and work to actively address systemic racial barriers. Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley listed several items for colleges to move into action, including the urgency to “use our positions of privilege, influence, and power to make a difference” (CCCCO, 2020). Given this system-wide opportunity to be more race-conscious, we documented how senior leadership and shared governance at La Sirena College operate as racialized spaces that tend to protect whiteness and resist equity efforts that seek to dismantle the barriers faced by racially minoritized communities (Bonilla-Silva, 1997). We use the concept of whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) within the scholarship of Critical Race Theory to help us understand how institutions, structures, and everyday practices within community college can maintain and perpetuate racism. Our fieldwork illuminated instances where shared governance became a racialized process where institutional structures served as barriers to racial equity, the workload was disproportionately placed on racially minoritized colleagues, and progressive equity efforts were resisted in private but commodified as assets in public.

At La Sirena College, the equity committee was comprised of students, staff, faculty, and vice presidents. Although the committee included over twenty members, only three to six members actively participated in the biweekly meetings. The most invested and active members were the co-chairs that formally led the group and a few racially minoritized colleagues who expressed a vested interest in advancing racial equity on campus. As a formal committee under shared governance, the committee was tasked with addressing student outcome disparities as part of the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives on campus. Towards these efforts, the committee sought to answer the Chancellor's Office call to action by drafting a unifying document that demonstrated a commitment to student equity. As weeks and months went by, the workgroup faced continuous resistance from campus leaders as they drafted a formal position document that asked individuals to recognize and address systemic racism on campus.



Our observations highlighted how the labor to create and put forward an actionable statement was placed on or taken on by the People of Color within the equity committee. For instance, of the people directly working on writing the Call to Action, all but one were racially minoritized. The writing group included solidarity among two Latinx classified staff, an Asian American woman, and a Black woman. Additionally, when the institution-specific call to action statement was completed, it was met with apprehension by the La Sirena president. Carlos, an active and passionate member of the equity committee shared with us:

“ I had a terrible meeting with [the president]. She refused to support the call to action. [She] says the college is not ready to talk about anti-racism. She started the line [with] “it’s not about race, it’s about income”. Then [the president] went on to say she doesn’t want to alienate anyone. She wanted us to replace it with a general ‘student success for all’ language. Alyssa and I refused. Then she said, ‘ok then the document is dead’ and said we should just focus on giving equity tips for [the] spring...This just happened yesterday, and I’m pretty upset and processing. ”

Carlos was not the only one upset by the decision. The equity committee also felt frustrated and one white faculty member named Clarissa from the group brought the issue to the academic senate. She shared, “I had to put my ass on the line at academic senate” because she believed “that’s what it means to be an equity warrior.” After the predominantly white academic senate threatened to vote no confidence, the president called upon a member of the equity committee to further discuss the statement. Although the issue had been taken to the academic senate by a white faculty member, the president reprimanded a Woman of Color from the equity committee for going above her. Ultimately, after much difficulty, the president outwardly supported the statement and initiatives created by the equity committee.

Based on our observations with regards to the call to action, the investment in time and labor put forth by the equity committee, and the reaction of senior leadership, we draw on the Critical Race Theory construct of whiteness as property developed by Cheryl Harris (1993) to better understand the existing barriers to racial equity efforts at La Sirena. Whiteness as property is defined as privileges often experienced by white people; privileges that can be transformed into material possessions (Harris, 1993). Whiteness as property encompasses four main functions, including the right to disposition, use, exclude, and sustain reputation status. In this section, we draw upon the right to use and maintain reputation to emphasize the ways that shared governance and leadership approaches at La Sirena functioned to maintain the status quo (whiteness) thereby inhibiting racial equity on campus. Using Whiteness as Property as an analytic lens, we demonstrate how whiteness was protected at La Sirena through shared governance (i.e., equity committee) and senior leadership (i.e., president) in the next sections.

The Right to Use and Enjoy Whiteness in Shared Governance

At La Sirena College, white privilege was exercised by members of the equity committee, the academic senate, and senior leadership. The task set forth by the CCCCCO was for California community colleges to identify, rethink, and address current and future racial equity efforts as a system. However, these efforts relied heavily and more frequently on the labor of People of Color within the equity workgroup. Whiteness as property was evident when the president initially rejected the statement, and later listened when a white faculty member and predominately white academic senate pushed further. In this instance, it was clear that those who identified as white held the privilege of speaking out without the same fear of retaliation as their minoritized counterparts, especially as their positions were often protected (i.e., tenure-track faculty, shared governance leadership). Whether in the academic senate or in SEC white members were able to use and enjoy their whiteness to place pressure on senior leadership. The Woman of Color from the equity workgroup did not have the same luxury and for that, suffered the consequences of the entire group because it was assumed that she was responsible for the involvement of the academic senate. In this example, whiteness “can be both experienced and deployed as a resource” in that white faculty and staff can be more forward when it comes to advancing equity without facing the same kind of repercussions as others (Harris, 1993, p. 1734).

Sustaining the Right to a Good Reputation and Elevated Status

Another example of the Whiteness as Property observed at La Sirena College was the president’s attempt to commodify equity efforts and be seen as a champion for racial justice. Although the president was consistently reluctant to support the equity committee’s call to action statement, it was only after the president’s reputation was jeopardized, that they then scheduled regular meetings with a minoritized employee from the equity group. It is especially important to note that the minoritized group member did not have protected employment status. Harris (1993) tells us that the loss of reputation threatens the racial hierarchy in which whiteness reigns supreme. In this example, the president’s reputation as a college leader who cares about equity and is capable of advancing racial justice on campus was in danger. The president’s support of the equity committee’s efforts thus became a performative gesture used to protect. This is what whiteness as property looks like on this college campus. However, is performative support for racial equity based on fear sustainable and enough to move these critical efforts forward?



Recommendations and Reflections

Advancing racial equity on community college campuses means moving beyond performative and symbolic gestures. We need to put action behind words, and even when community colleges try to do that, it's met with resistance, especially if led by racially minoritized individuals. Acknowledging that there is a problem is the first step. Based on this research and the urgency to be intentional when it comes to racial equity, our overarching recommendation for college leaders is to listen to what racial equity advocates have to say and be open to taking action based on this information. Our recommendations include providing adequate support to equity advocates, expanding the distribution of racial equity work, recognizing and leveraging positional privilege, and examining how current structures support or hinder racial equity efforts.

Reflections

Acknowledging white privilege is an important first step toward addressing systemic barriers to employees, especially those doing racial equity work. We conclude by posing the following reflection questions:

- How can college leaders in positions of privilege leverage their status to protect more vulnerable employees in carrying out racial equity work?
- What are strategies to prioritize racial equity efforts within a rigid process of shared governance protocols? And what does dismantling structural barriers for students mean for college procedures, such as those within shared governance?
- If you are not directly involved with equity groups on your campus, how can you still provide support to those who are?



Implications and Action Steps

Why Did We Do This Work?

We set out to support equity advocates across four community colleges amid the disruption of the pandemic and amplified calls for racial justice. What we detailed in our findings section were emerging insights based on the first year of our project which highlighted the realities of educational leaders at our community colleges as they attempted to sustain racial equity efforts under the unprecedented circumstances brought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our engagement in this project was a genuine effort to avoid any rollback of efforts and momentum in the quest for equity among these four campuses. To this end, we collaborated with student equity leaders and their institutional equity workgroups to consider how to maintain, revise, and recreate planned 2019-2022 equity efforts under the conditions of the pandemic. Across all four sites, we observed how despite the professional and personal disruptions endured by these equity advocates, they remained committed to creating and sustaining racial equity efforts. In this final section of our report, we summarize our learning, share implications, and provide some steps to move forward.

What Did We Learn?

In our first theme, we described the tension between setting ambitious goals and trying to achieve them amid the pandemic. As one faculty member described it, “doing equity work during a global pandemic felt like steering a ship during a chaotic storm.” Drawing from this visualization, other equity advocates shared insight on the ways they were just trying to ride out the storm, repair the ship amid crashing waves, and preserve a sense of optimism for racial equity—in hopes of one day achieving it. As researchers, a lesson we learned was the need to be cognizant of the personal and professional responsibilities individual committee members carry as they engage in equity work within their institutions. These personal professional responsibilities weighed heavily on the lives of SEC members. As we still live through the pandemic, we emphasize the need for equity advocates to protect their mental health and physical well being before trying to sustain and advance institutional equity efforts.



Our second theme focused on the intentionality placed in identifying, recruiting, and retaining campus members to serve and support equity efforts. As our work continued, we recognized the importance of having diverse members, with different equity-oriented perspectives, involved in institutional equity workgroups. Having diverse equity-oriented perspectives enable workgroups to acknowledge the intersections of race, racism, and racial equity in the implementation of external reforms and organizational change. We observed some stark differences between campuses that used a strict shared governance model that focused on constituency and others that had a less prescribed approach to membership representation. Amid the pandemic, the colleges faced an inability to have team members with certain levels of competence, capacity, or commitment. This made the work towards equity challenging to sustain and progress. We urge campuses to be strategic and intentional when identifying, recruiting, and retaining committee members that will help oversee and carry out critical change efforts in the quest for institutional equity.

In our third theme, we highlighted the engagement and involvement of senior leaders in campus-based racial equity work. Across our sites, we observed varied ways that presidents and cabinet-level leaders participated, or did not, in conversation, decisions, and actions related to improving issues of equity and inclusion. A key aspect of campuses being able to progress their goals and efforts was being actively supported by senior leaders through consistent engagement in meetings, given the discretion to make decisions as an equity workgroup, and being provided additional resources to expand the capacity to fulfill and follow through with their envisioned efforts. We note that active involvement, engagement, and support from senior leaders were critical components to setting up the conditions for equity workgroups to carry out their pandemic-altered efforts.

In our final theme, we described the (in)action of campus community members that hold white privilege, voice, and status to either enable or hinder racial equity efforts. Using the concepts of whiteness as property, we described the inability of white leaders to use their power and status to advance demands for racial justice on campus from community members at the local level as well as the CCC Chancellor's Call for Action at the system level. The lack of top-down support placed a large burden on equity advocates of color to maintain their racial equity efforts. Missing support from senior leaders, equity workgroup members felt stuck, noting that they felt like they could not move forward without leadership and institutional support. This final theme reminds us that racial equity work can be led by individuals, but the weight of change should not be shouldered by individuals, that responsibility must fall on everyone on campus, especially senior leaders, governance leaders, trustees, and other positions of power and influence. Given the shared insight, we move to discuss the broader lessons learned and the implications of our work in hopes of better supporting equity advocates to carry out racialized organizational change.

Why Does it Matter?

Our Advancing Racial Equity project explores and documents the ways racial equity efforts in community colleges were influenced and altered by the COVID-19 crisis and amplified calls for racial justice. Rather than just observe what was done at each campus, the CCHALES Research Collective, served as advocates and instigators to the racial equity work being done at each site. Our report highlights the conditions experienced by community college equity advocates as they attempted to sustain, adapt, and advance racial equity efforts.

Drawing from our experiences in this project, we discuss two overarching themes that can help advance racial equity efforts. The first theme illustrates the level of organizational support equity advocates received to carry out their efforts. The second theme showcases the need to distribute responsibility for carrying out equity efforts across a broad coalition of campus members to ensure successful implementation and action. Each theme provides tangible strategies to take action and develop the necessary conditions, commitments, and infrastructure to actualize the race-conscious efforts articulated in student equity plans.

Organizational Support for Equity Advocates Aspirations for Racial Justice

Organizations are not race-neutral (Kraus et al., 2022; Ray, 2019; Ray & Purifoy, 2019). Their history, identity, culture, and leadership structure all contribute to conditions and processes that are antithetical to notions of racial justice (Bohonos & Sisco, 2021). Our findings outline how levels of organizational support within each institution influence what equity advocates can achieve as it relates to equity-oriented change. Supportive organizational environments include symbolic and material support from campus leadership, minimal or passive resistance from shared governance, and allowing the equity workgroup a level of discretion and autonomy to make their decisions. On the other hand, unsupportive environments within our sites highlighted the minimal support from senior administrators, constant pushback from the academic senate and faculty members, and the ways equity workgroups were rendered powerless in decision-making processes. As such, we share three recommendations to improve the organizational conditions to support equity advocates in their work.

1. Understanding the Contested Organizational Terrain

Despite the best-designed plans, equity advocates will constantly face obstacles, barriers, and roadblocks. One strategy to include when developing and implementing racial equity efforts is to actively assess and map the existing conditions on their campus that serve both as sites of opportunities as well as potential resistance to the type of change being proposed. Any effort that seeks to disrupt patterns of racial inequity will be embedded within an organization that may have existing conditions that serve as obstructions to this work. Through our collaborations, we supported equity advocates to map out all of the existing formal and informal structures, practices, policies, and rules on campus that serve as roadblocks or catalysts for racialized organizational change. This type of internal inquiry helps to have honest, yet complicated, conversations about the realities of the institution and its readiness for transformative change (Kezar, 2014).

2. Engaging Leaders Who Can Leverage Power and Status for Racial Equity

Our second strategy seeks to call-in senior leaders to be more involved in the racial equity work by engaging with the campus workgroup overseeing implementation as well as the individual student equity leader coordinating these efforts. We illustrated the varying levels of engagement and support from senior leaders and noticed how some campuses benefited from having presidents and VPs that attended meetings to a) increase awareness, b) acknowledge concerns, and c) use their status to empower the workgroup or take action on their behalf. Having supportive senior leaders allowed equity advocates to advance their aspirations for racial justice and feel like their time, energy, and effort were valued and appreciated.

Under the Chancellor's Call to Action, senior leaders must recognize their active role in helping equity advocates advance institutional equity efforts and lighten the load felt by individuals. Depending on existing involvement, senior administrators need to be present to listen, to engage, to act. This presence helps to lessen the distance between on-the-ground equity concerns and leaders' awareness and decision-making processes. If equity advocates are seeking to disrupt policies, practices, and behaviors on campus that perpetuate, if not exacerbate racial inequity, it is fair to ask senior leaders how they will intentionally support the equity workgroup in this process to make the campus a more equitable institution.

3. Expanding Organizational Support and Infrastructure

We documented the divide between what equity advocates want to achieve as it relates to racial justice and the actual resources, time, and capacity at their disposal to progress those goals. Providing material resources and expanding the infrastructure for equity work helps to bridge the gap limiting equity advocates from successfully carrying out their planned efforts. Malen and colleagues (2014) add that shortcomings in organizational capacity are a primary issue and hindrance to implementing policy in ways that achieve its intended goals. We cannot fail, our students need us to achieve our ambitious goals of racial equity. This recommendation is directed at system-, district-, and institutional-level leaders to support equity advocates with the increased resources and capacity for race-conscious planning and implementation, especially when the pandemic makes the work of equity that much harder, scattered, and decentralized. The racial equity efforts under the Student Equity and Achievement program are directly connected to the Vision for Success goals as well as the allocation strategy under the Student Centered Funding Formula metrics, there is a need for resources to be braided and leveraged to achieve the aspirations of closing equity gaps and improving student outcomes across the system.



Distributing Responsibilities for Racial Equity

Second, our research insight highlights the importance of having a broad coalition on campus to help sustain and advance planned efforts to improve racial equity. Across our sites, some Student Equity Leaders found themselves in isolated roles with a high concentration of equity responsibilities while others thrived in a more collaborative environment where they worked with a broad coalition to carry out institutional equity efforts. How responsibilities for equity efforts were distributed on campus played an important factor in the ability to advance racialized organizational change.

As we aim to enhance racial equity in community college, it is important to understand that this work must be a shared responsibility campus-wide. Broadening buy-in, building solidarity, and committing to collective action are critical to the endeavor of identifying, addressing, and eliminating inequity in community college. We share recommendations that draw on our insight to establish a cross-campus coalition that helps to engage and lead the work of racialized organizational change.

1. Recognize, Support, and Compensate for Racialized Equity Labor

A key strategy in making racial equity a campus-wide responsibility is to recognize who leads the work as well as the burden it places on these individuals. Within our sites, all four Student Equity Leaders self-identified as people of color with a personal and professional commitment to improving conditions and outcomes for minoritized communities. For example, one colleague shared: “I put the weight of everything on my shoulders. I know that’s who I am and what this job requires.” This idea of needing to carry the “weight” of change resonated with many, especially the costs associated with overseeing race work which included high-levels of stress, increased sense of isolation, and feelings of burnout. These observations highlight what Lerma and colleagues (2020) describe as “racialized equity labor” which is a form of taxation for people of color working within higher education organizations. The notion of racialized equity labor is particularly important in this context and needs to be understood, acknowledged, and recognized by institutional and system leaders. Specifically, we argue that the negative impacts of racialized equity labor can be addressed by: (1) acknowledging and recognizing the extent of the labor, energy, and emotion tied to leading institutional equity efforts, (2) developing and institutionalizing a collective commitment to equity, (3) compensating equity advocates that serve on these formal equity workgroups, and (4) building the capacity for equity leaders to be successful with additional decision-making power, resources and support staff.

2. Building the Coalition of Equity Advocates

Second, we identified how the composition of the equity workgroup and membership selection process influenced the ability to sustain equity efforts. Prior to the pandemic, most campuses used a constituency-based process to identify and select individuals to serve on equity workgroups that explicitly represented an academic area such as the social sciences or employee groups like classified professionals. Under the conditions of the pandemic, we recognized the need for equity workgroup members to sustain themselves for before attempting to sustain institutional efforts, especially when members were a) volunteering their time to support equity-oriented organizational change b) doing this work as an add-on to their primary responsibilities, and c) had varying experiences and commitments to racial equity. We offer two strategies to help establish a collective

space with shared values, responsibilities, and commitments to racial equity work. The first is to build a coalition that prioritizes identifying members based on competencies around racial equity and experience with change efforts as well as the more traditional constituency-based approach. This can help to identify and include members that have an understanding of the causes of racial inequity on campus, possess a willingness to carry out the difficult work of organizational change, and bring their own experiences and skills from their designated area to create a broader institutional coalition. The second is for the Student Equity Leader to continuously assess the capacity of workgroup members to be involved in this work as well as provide professional learning opportunities for existing members to grow and build their knowledge around racial equity and campus change.

3. Moving Away from Individual Action to Address Structural Problems

Lastly, we recognize the costs associated with trying to sustain racial equity efforts under the pandemic. Living through uncertainty and an ever-changing higher education landscape, we witnessed caring and committed equity advocates that intentionally and urgently responded to and created the necessary structures and support—whether virtual or in-person—to help students. At the end of the 2020-2021 academic year, many equity advocates reported being tired and burnt out. Some noted that they would not be returning to the workgroup in the new academic year. We started to see how equity advocates, especially those identifying as racially minoritized, had to choose to preserve themselves—either economic livelihood, family, physical health, mental wellbeing—over the planned equity efforts of the institution. In essence, we saw how under the conditions of the pandemic the work for racial equity went from “heart-work” to “harm-work,” especially at project sites with limited organizational support and committed colleagues. Research documents how racially minoritized people have primarily carried the burden and the responsibility of equity efforts before and since the pandemic (Aguilar-Smith & Gonzales, 2019; Ahmed, 2012; Felix & Jimenez Perez, 2021)—put simply, they are overburdened, underpaid, and tired. Through this work, we argue that equity advocates must sustain themselves first only then can the opportunities and challenges of equity work be pursued. Moving forward institutions and their leaders must move away from individual and siloed efforts to improve equity; these efforts to transform the institution can only be achieved through collective action and the leveraging of existing resources that are put into use to advance racial equity.



Conclusion

To achieve racial equity, the weight of change and responsibility for equity must be distributed amongst the many, supported by senior leadership and faculty unions to expand buy-in, permeate across campus, and begin to institutionalize these efforts rather than be relegated to the periphery of what the institution does. Let's work towards having convergence between equity advocates' commitment to racial justice, institutional receptivity and response to this work, and not just symbolic resources, but fiscal and human ones to successfully advance racial equity work. As we conclude this report, we share action steps that can support community college equity advocates to carry out the work of creating more race-conscious, equity-minded, and just institutions.

Action Steps

- Examine the organizational conditions that can advance and hinder equity efforts
- Call-in your president and senior leaders to be actively involved in the race work
- Expand existing infrastructure, resources, and support for equity-oriented change
- Build a coalition of equity advocates intentionally selected for competencies, capacity, and commitment, in addition to constituency groups represented
- Provide equity workgroup with increased levels of discretion and autonomy
- Recognize the difficulty for equity advocates to lead and carry out change efforts under the conditions of the pandemic; recognize and compensate all equity workgroup members for their Racialized Equity Labor
- Live out solidarity statements and resolutions with meaningful and sustained responses to racial reckoning, call to action, community demands for racial justice
- Systemic inequity takes a systemic response, no individual efforts can truly impact the enduring nature of racism embedded within our educational structures. We must center solidarity building and collective action to address the organizational conditions, contexts, and challenges to impede racial equity.

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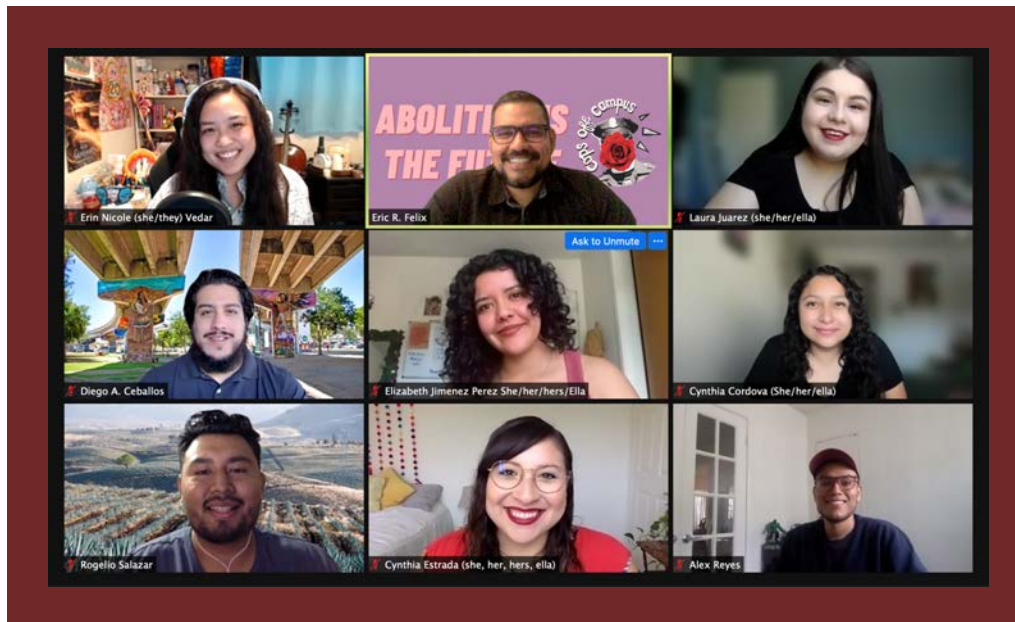
For over 16 months we have all dedicated our time and energy to engaging with equity advocates across the four campuses in our project. In addition to the fieldwork conducted, CCHALES members were able to think, analyze, and write up their observations and interactions into insight and action. A sincere thank you to Alex Reyes, Cynthia Cordova, Diego Ceballos, Erin Nicole Reyes Vedar, Laura Juarez, and Rogelio Salazar for the hours of immersed virtual fieldwork that turned this report from blank pages to findings and implications that inform practitioners in community college. A big shout out as well to Wesley Cox and Carlos A. Galan for reviewing and providing feedback on the report to get it to a publishable version. And of course, I am grateful to future Doctora Cynthia Estrada for shepherding the writing, editing, and printing process. I know it was not easy to work with multiple writers and reviewers, but you successfully got us to the publication finish line. Lastly, thank you to the College Futures Foundation and our Program Officer, April Yee, Ph.D., for entrusting us with the resources to do this work and share our findings. Any errors, omissions, and critiques fall on me, Eric. Any praise, affirmation, and kudos should be directed to my wonderful CCHALES colleagues.

About CCHALES

About the CCHALES Research Collective

The Community College HigherEd Access Leadership Equity Scholarship (CCHALES) Research Collective at San Diego State University is focused on examining the systems, structures, and practices within higher education that hinder racial equity. The CCHALES Research Collective was started at SDSU on October 2, 2019. We conduct policy-relevant and practice-focused scholarship to improve the conditions, experiences, and outcomes for racially-minoritized students, especially in the community college context. We are Scholars of Color making a difference in our communities, education, and society at large. We strive to give back to the public education systems that shaped our trajectory and helped us become who we are.

CCHALES is more than research, it is family, it is community; a space for us to grow and thrive without having to reduce or silence ourselves to fit the norms of academia. The research we do, the skills we possess, and the conviction in our writing come from our parents, families, culture, and experiences. We gain strength from them and protect them from academic spaces seeking to erase our identities, experiences, and ways of knowing. As first-gen, community-grown, Scholars of Color, we say ¡CCHALES! to the whackness of white supremacy in higher education and do our best to dismantle and build something different. We wholeheartedly believe that a new world is possible and actively aspire to dream, build, and sustain it. Check out [the team members](#) and the richness they bring to the group.



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