

Closing Opportunity Gaps in the Classroom

In the summer of 2020, following George Floyd’s death and the international demand to stop police violence against Black and Brown people, the California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office released a call to action to all California community colleges to do their part in combating racism. That moment presented an opportunity for college equity leaders across the state to steer financial, political, and institutional support toward college redesign and professional development to close opportunity gaps for Black and Brown students. Several colleges leveraged this moment to pause, dig into their institutional data, and plan trainings, communities of practice, and institutes focused on closing gaps that exist in the classroom. The focus on the classroom allows faculty the opportunity to examine both the personal and social intersections of historical, societal, political, and



personal biases and beliefs about race. This reflection provides an entry into understanding how their own teaching practices, policies, and curriculum may work to either perpetuate or close existing gaps in the success of Black and

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Brown students. Planning a collegewide approach to closing opportunity gaps in the classroom is still evolving, but some key ingredients to a successful implementation are beginning to emerge.

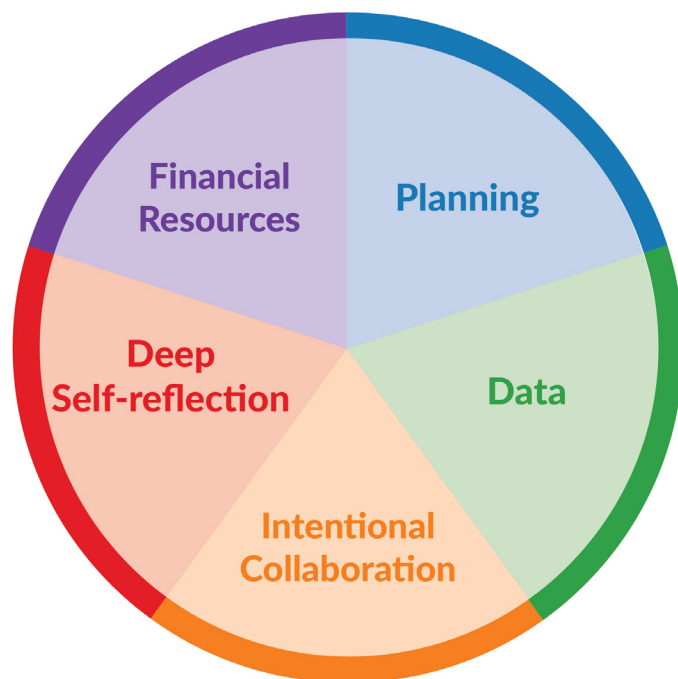
College leaders at Santa Monica College and Cuyamaca College recognized that much of the work to close opportunity gaps has been siloed in student services and that a more concerted effort needed to be made to close these gaps in the classroom. They recognized that focusing on the student experience of the college outside of the classroom was not enough to move the needle on equity. They realized that they needed to recognize students’ classroom learning and community experiences as well as their social experiences living as Black or Brown students in institutions built by and for white people. The integration of these efforts and a deepened commitment to be race forward is a necessary next step to improving success outcomes for students of color.

In December 2021, Santa Monica College and Cuyamaca College came together at a round table discussion hosted by Career Ladders Project to share their approach to bringing equity into the classroom with a focus on dismantling systemic structures that perpetuate racism, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy. Both colleges are guiding hundreds of faculty to embark on the journey to become

anti-racist classroom instructors. This publication shares what they have identified as key ingredients to developing their programs and details about each program with the hope that other college leaders might find inspiration to take on large-scale efforts that have the potential to support all faculty, thus changing experiences for all Black and Brown students at the college.

Key Ingredients

Santa Monica College (SMC) and Cuyamaca College (CC) both recognized a need to move equity work into classrooms across the college. SMC’s guided pathways team and racial equity leaders focused on teaching and learning and set out to “equitize gateway courses” through deep, intentional, and equity-focused professional development for faculty. CC came to a similar realization. After years of building student engagement, community, and support outside of the classroom, CC faculty and equity leaders concluded that nothing could really change until classroom experiences changed. After securing a budget and a planning team, they too set out to plan a professional development experience for faculty that challenges them to learn, self-reflect, and make changes to their curriculum and practices. In developing these professional development programs focused on combating



anti-Blackness and leading with anti-racist values, these colleges identified five key ingredients toward building and implementing a collegewide equity-focused instructional faculty development effort.

Planning

Colleges that have developed a concerted collegewide effort to close opportunity gaps in the classroom spent months planning. At SMC, faculty guided pathways and equity leaders met weekly for several months to gain a better understanding of the student experience inside and outside of the classroom. Together they looked at student success data and longitudinal equity gaps and learned more about trauma-informed community and cultural wealth models, and other evidence-based approaches in equity-centered, equity-minded teaching practices proven to close racial equity gaps. At CC, they also looked to existing frameworks for guidance on how to develop a professional development program that would lead to sustainable change recognizing that this change required a strategy, short- and long-term plans, creative thinking, and the willingness to iterate.



CC had already focused much of their equity work in student service areas. The planning team applied a design-thinking approach to design an equity institute for instructional faculty to move equity into the classroom. Both colleges recognized a need for deep inquiry, discussion, brainstorming, and understanding of the racialized experiences of students inside and outside the classroom to find a way to change students' experiences in the classroom and increase success rates. They also recognized a need for a space where faculty could learn more about systemic and institutionalized

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racism in the larger context as well as in the personal and professional domains of individual faculty.

Data

Colleges are leveraging data to plan, implement, and iterate on their faculty professional development efforts focused on collegewide closure of racial equity gaps. One frequently used practice in equity-focused faculty development practices is for faculty to use their own course-specific equity data (i.e., success and retention data disaggregated by race and ethnicity) to try to understand what is happening in their classrooms. Faculty also reflect on their role, policies, and curriculum, and explore ways to challenge white-centered pedagogy and practices. In the planning stage, SMC started with a focus on gateway courses identified in collegewide program mapping sessions. In CC's equity institute workshops, faculty are presented with their own equity data and guided through a reflection and inquiry process. This helps give each faculty member a foundation for examining where to dig into their current pedagogy and practice.

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Intentional Collaboration

Like other efforts in guided pathways and redesign, designing and implementing a collegewide effort to close racial equity gaps in classrooms requires deep collaboration across disciplines and functional areas of the college. Collaboration with the Office of Research and Planning is integral to the effort, providing timely and relevant data. Both SMC and CC worked closely with their institutional researchers, students, and faculty colleagues across disciplines. Collaboration and support is also needed with equity-minded practitioners across the college. Executive level management and college presidents can collaborate by prioritizing the work, setting aside time for the work to occur, and committing resources toward faculty development. Faculty leaders can collaborate to build buy-in for the effort, design approaches that will yield sustainable and long-lasting change, take on leadership roles within the work, and support communication about the changes.

Deep Self-reflection

Because racism is structural, institutional, and personal, self-reflection at every level is key

for making changes. Recognizing the way that institutions of higher education were designed to center and support whiteness takes inquiry, learning, and vulnerability. To bring the public and personal domains together to better understand how these impact curriculum design and classroom climate as well as students' experiences inside and outside the classroom takes reflection, discussion, and processing. When faculty commit to combating anti-Blackness and racism in their classrooms, they embark on a process of learning and reflection. Both SMC and CC support faculty in this self-reflection as they learn about critical race theory and examine their own racial, social, and cultural identities. Moving from the social and structural to the personal helps to create a frame for discussions that acknowledges that systemic and structural racism has influenced everyone on a variety of levels. Changing college practices and policies is not enough. Faculty need to understand their own role in the system.

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Financial Resources

Combating institutionalized and systemic racism takes planning, time, research, and deep personal and professional work. Institutions that have made the commitment to support faculty in combating anti-Blackness and racism are paying them through release time for faculty leaders and stipends for participants. CC has an annual budget allocation committed to the effort. SMC has secured funding for two five-semester cohorts leveraging leadership from Guided Pathways and funding from Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) to support the faculty participants.

Cuyamaca College

Equity-Minded Teaching and Learning Institute (EMTLI)

Cuyamaca College first implemented the EMTLI in 2019 after many years of attempting to address opportunity gaps at the college by focusing primarily on student services with little success. This two-semester program focuses squarely on instruction; it grew out of robust collaboration between an administrator, faculty, and research team that dug into institutional equity data and other research. Using a design-thinking approach based on a race-conscious understanding of the student experience, Cuyamaca College designed the EMTLI, a yearlong cohort-based professional

development series for faculty to launch their journey into becoming equity-minded practitioners and closing equity gaps in their classrooms. As of the 2021-2022 academic year, nearly 50% of full-time faculty will have completed the training.

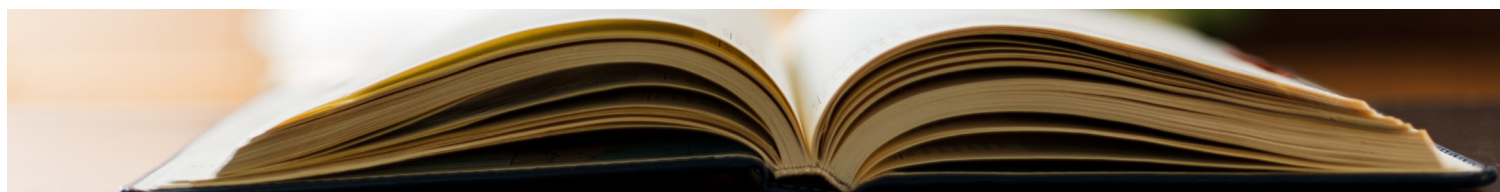
Length: Two semesters/14 meetings (two hours on Fridays)

Program leads and core planning team: Student Success and Equity Faculty Coordinator, Teaching and Learning Faculty Coordinator, Research and Planning Analyst, and Dean of Student Success and Equity

Program Description

Phase 1 focuses on reflection and knowledge-building grounded in Critical Race Theory. Faculty spend time learning about the history of systemic and structural racism with a focus on educational systems in the United States designed to support a white supremacist belief system. Participants gain an understanding of the history of institutionalized racism and white supremacy in academia. Participants also receive their own personal student equity data disaggregated by race and reflect on the racial equity gaps in access to and outcomes in their own classrooms. Taking that reflection, participants develop their own data narrative. This narrative supports participants in identifying where they are in their equity journey and where they want to go. During this first semester, faculty also hear the stories of faculty from other colleges who have intentionally embarked on a similar journey to close equity gaps in their own practice. These speakers share their own process of coming to understand the ways that they were indoctrinated into the white supremacist system and how they are reflecting and working to dismantle that in their own thinking and practice.

Phase 2 focuses on how people operationalize change in their classrooms. Faculty redesign their syllabi and assessments, gather input and feedback, and make plans for implementing change and continuing to interrogate their own pedagogy and practice beyond EMTLI. At the end of the two semesters, faculty submit a portfolio showcasing their work and present their plans for change. Faculty receive stipends upon completion of the program and submission of the portfolio.



Santa Monica College

Equitizing Gateway Courses (EGC)

Santa Monica College's EGC grew out of the guided pathways college redesign efforts, initially designed to include faculty participants who were teaching gateway courses. With increased attention to and support for racial equity during the Covid-19 pandemic and racial uprisings, SMC decided to scale up its efforts and reconceptualize all courses as having the potential to be gateways to student success. The first cohort, open to all full-time and part-time faculty across all academic departments at the college, launched in fall 2021. The second cohort launched in fall 2022.

A five-semester program, EGC brings faculty together in small departmental groups and larger learning communities to learn, reflect, and develop action plans to close equity gaps in their classrooms and programs.

Length: Five semesters with bi-weekly meetings

Program leads: Two faculty co-leads and data coaches for each department group

Program planning team: Faculty co-leads and an institutional researcher

Program Description

EGC is a holistic and multi-tiered program designed by faculty for faculty with various levels of group participation:

Equity to Action groups: Small departmental groups that meet bi-weekly, decreasing in frequency over the five semesters. They engage in semi-structured guided conversation with discussion prompts and curriculum. Discussion is led by equity coaches, people from the department trained to facilitate these groups and the difficult conversations. These groups go through four phases each semester. Department chairs have a separate Equity to Action group, so that faculty can be free from concerns about evaluation. This group is led by a retired department chair and known equity leader.

Faculty Lifelong Learning Consortium: Large convenings featuring internal and external speakers where everyone in the EGC cohort comes together.

Virtual Community: In Canvas, faculty have access to all of the materials for the Equity to Action Group.

The Equity to Action Groups go through four phases within each semester based on a holistic and developmental model:

Phase 1: Critical self-reflection. Participants reflect on their own personal, racial, social, and cultural identities and how that relates to students' identities. They also spend time reflecting on professional identities, what it means to be a professor in community college, and what they may have internalized in that capacity that may shape how they teach and relate to today's students.

Phase 2: Black and Latinx student experience. Faculty hear various student narratives and reflect on the experiences of Black and Latinx students. Faculty review their course-specific success data and reflect on why the equity gaps are there. The focus of Phase 2 is on humanizing the student experience and preparing faculty for research and planning during the next semester.

Phase 3: Equity-centered pedagogy. Faculty learn various frameworks including community responsive, culturally responsive, anti-racist, and trauma-informed pedagogy. Faculty reflect on how to bring these strategies into the classroom, focusing on their role in the promotion of psychological well-being for students.

Phase 4: Meaningful engagement. Faculty explore how meaningful engagement happens inside and outside of the classroom with close attention to the various ways structural and systemic forms of racism impact student engagement. Participants analyze the concept of engagement, exploring the question, “How do we begin to create a sense of safety and belonging for Black and Latinx students?”

Throughout the five semester program, faculty have the opportunity to apply what they learn about equity-centered pedagogies and through critical reflection are supported to completely transform a course including teaching methods, inclusion of critical and marginalized scholarship, development of a wider range of assessment methods, and inclusion of best practices in student engagement and retention. As a final piece of EGC, faculty will implement the changes, be observed by a peer in the program, and receive feedback. This feedback is incorporated as part of the iterative process of critical pedagogy development.



Conclusion

The faculty learn and explore difficult topics around structural racism, institutional racism, personal racism, whiteness, and power, diverging and converging between the public and the personal throughout their journey.

Cuyamaca College and Santa Monica College both worked with college guided pathways and equity teams, local Academic Senates and faculty bargaining units to develop and build buy-in for a faculty professional development structure that asks faculty to be vulnerable, to participate in reflections and discussions that may be uncomfortable, and to change their practice and pedagogy to center them on students and equity. To do this, the project leads had support throughout the college and within their planning team partnerships. They spent significant time planning a curriculum and structure that works for their faculty, and they set out to scale the effort with the goal of closing opportunity gaps across the college. The faculty learn and explore difficult topics around structural racism, institutional racism, personal racism, whiteness, and power, diverging and converging between the public and the personal throughout their journey. Faculty participants are challenged and are confronting difficult realities like anti-Blackness and white supremacy through discussions and reflections.

Through careful planning and implementation, both colleges are working to support hundreds of faculty in changing their teaching, with goals of continuing to bring in more with each new cohort. This is the beginning of the equity journey for some faculty and a continuation for others, but in either case the professional development provides faculty with support and structure in which to dive deep into issues of racism and begin to rethink and redesign their classes in a way that centers the student experience.



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