



# Delivering Equitable Counseling: How Can We Get There?

Career Ladders Project (CLP), with funding from College Futures Foundation, set out to learn ways counselors are pivoting to provide more equitable counseling experiences for students and what barriers they are finding as they work to implement these practices. CLP engaged counselors across the state in facilitated think tanks, thought partner meetings, statewide convenings, and interviews to share their vision for providing more equitable counseling and holistic support for students. Given the California Community College system’s [vision](#) for equity in success, access, and support, this resource, tool, and forthcoming college spotlights can serve to push conversations on campus forward and seed ideas for more equitable student services.

## A Vision for Equitable Counseling



*“Grounded in community and familia, when we enroll our scholars, we enroll the whole fam[ily]. How are we recognizing them as tremendous sources of strength and inviting them to be a part of the scholar journey?”*

—Equitable Counseling Think Tank Participant

Equitable counseling requires a whole student, whole community approach to student support. As students and families around the state continue to struggle with navigating systemic barriers, counselors are re-imagining past practices, embracing a “familia” approach that supports a sense of belonging, inclusion, and wraparound support for students and their families, putting community back in community colleges. The shifts across the state with the expansion of dual enrollment, the student success funding formula, Vision 2030, Guided Pathways, and CalGETC to name a few, have pulled counselors in many directions. Regardless, the counselors who contributed to this resource remain committed to reimagining community college counseling services as equitable, inclusive, and embracing the ethos of familia. This vision includes a move away from focusing on transactional practices to centering practices that are more transformative for students, an adoption of effective practices emerging from special programs and learning communities, and a recognition of counselors as leaders.

This publication provides a snapshot of these concepts as a window into the movement around the state. It intends to spark conversations around deeper counselor engagement and leadership. Examples spotlighting the work of colleges around the state will be published in CLP’s new “Equitable Counseling” series, starting in late spring 2024.

## Equitable Counseling Approaches

### Focus on Transformative Support over Transactional

Counselors are on the front lines witnessing the impact of transactional processes and practices that often fall short of fully recognizing or addressing students’ needs. Transactional counseling practices focus on the quantity over quality such as the number of student educational plans rather than meaningful educational planning sessions with students. It’s a problem-oriented approach focused on addressing immediate concerns and resolving specific issues faced by students such as choosing classes, navigating the financial aid process, managing time, and planning for transfer. These are important issues, yet many of them can be addressed by student services classified staff, freeing up time for counselors to provide personalized, transformative counseling support.

Transformative counseling adopts a broader perspective, aiming to empower students holistically through an equity lens. This approach recognizes that personal growth and development are integral components of a student’s journey. Transformative counseling goes beyond immediate needs to build self-agency and problem-solving skills, striving to support deeper and lasting changes in a student’s mindset, behavior, and overall well-being. Its goal is to foster self-awareness, resilience, and a sense of purpose.

Holistic and humanizing approaches are central to a transformative counseling model. A holistic approach acknowledges the interconnectedness of various aspects of a student’s life, including academic, personal, cultural, ethnic background and social dimensions. Humanizing practices emphasize empathy, understanding, and respect for the unique experiences and perspectives of each student. These elements contribute to creating a supportive and inclusive counseling environment, fostering personal growth and transformation.

### What does transformative counseling look like?

For transformative counseling to thrive, the structures and delivery systems within a community college must be intentionally designed to support and reinforce it. Key structures that support transformative counseling include holistic support coordinated across the college, professional development for counselors, integration of technology tools, student-centered spaces, community engagement and partnerships, and a commitment to continuous quality improvement through outcomes assessment and mechanisms for student engagement in planning.

With a transformative counseling model, students would have easy access to campus resources and tools in a just-in-time fashion. And it would support students all along their college journey, starting with dual enrollment through community college, transfer, and career transitions.



## **Uplift Practices of Learning Communities and Special Programs**

Learning communities such as Puente and Umoja and special programs like EOP&S and Veterans Services provide wraparound support services grounded in familia. In these programs, each counselor works with a caseload of students and focuses on building relationships, a model that has proven to be successful in increasing student outcomes. They also have consistent communication and regular meetings with instructional faculty co-leads to share pedagogical practices and collaborate on student events and services. In the learning communities, counselors also actively collaborate with instructional faculty to bridge the gap for students between their classroom and support experiences.

## **Utilize Counseling as a Leadership Knowledgebase**

There is an urgent need to invite more counselors to assume leadership roles. The work of a counselor is centered on students, yet the varied responsibilities for counselors—coordinating learning communities, building educational plans, staying current with articulation agreements and local program changes, and supporting the academic and personal growth of students—can leave them with little time to lead work groups, committees, and task forces. Consequently, counselor voice and expertise is not generally integrated within broader college deliberations and planning where it could provide much needed depth and student-centered insight. The challenge is balance: How do counselors continue to support students and actively participate in college leadership?

Institutions aspire to center the lives and experiences of students, and counselors serve as a key resource in doing that. Counselors see students with varying goals and life circumstances and are able to advocate for the support and resources students need the most. The relationship counselors develop with students allows counselors to see the individual student needs and the systemic challenges students face in meeting those needs. That data is what institutions need to begin planning for transformation. Ensuring counselors are integral to the college planning processes can support the institution in student-centered planning and implementation.

## How Counseling Faculty are Moving Towards Equitable Counseling

The lives of our students are dynamic. Our institutions are transforming. To meet the changes, counselors must remain agile in practice, pivot to ensure students are supported through changes, and continue to connect practice-to-equity. Counselors cannot compromise their practice when the system's priorities shift and initiatives change. Instead, counselors must use these shifts to refine practices, keeping equity at the center. Counseling faculty are moving towards an equitable counseling model in small and big ways:

- Adapting learning community counseling practices
- Utilizing communities of practice to support equity-focused change makers
- Redesigning practices based on shared definitions of equity and justice
- Utilizing success coaches/advisors/peer coaches as support
- Piloting new practices and programs

To ensure this work changes institutional counseling models, an institutional commitment to systemic change is critical.

## Challenges Colleges Face in Delivering Equitable Counseling

- State mandates combined with a lack of time have led to institutions requiring counselors to focus on quantity over quality.
- Many counselor positions and initiatives are funded by limited-term categorical funding; this undermines counselor confidence and overall stability of their departments and services.
- Counselors struggle to support all students with equitable services when their caseload gets too big or their schedule is impacted.
- Counseling departments need more support staff to address the “transactional” work, so counselors can do more of the transformative and humanizing counseling work.

## Where to Go From Here

As colleges scramble to keep up with the legislative changes rolling in such as AB 705/1705, AB 928, and various Title 5 changes, ensuring counseling practices remain student-centered and equity-focused becomes increasingly challenging. To ensure that equitable counseling doesn't get lost in the day-to-day transactional work, counseling departments and student services areas can develop a guiding framework for their work and practices that includes a shared understanding of values, vision, roles and responsibilities and a strategic plan for moving counseling practices out of the transactional and into the transformational.



# Moving Towards Equitable Counseling

## A Guide to Support Colleges in Planning a Transformative Counseling Experience for Students

As you embark on establishing a vision and plan for equitable counseling, gather a team of counselors, student services staff, and managers to develop a vision and plan for the work. Use this guide with a facilitator to support those sessions.

### Develop a Shared Vision and Values

Use the guiding questions to brainstorm your vision and values. Then storyboard what the student will experience and what values that experience exemplifies.

- What would a transformative counseling experience look like for the student?
- What structural supports do counselors need to establish strong relationships with students?
- What are some of the “theoretical practices” of holistic counseling that we can utilize as equity strategies?
- How can we utilize success coaches/advisors in a way that best supports our counseling practice while providing holistic services to students?
- How do we scale the effective practices happening in special programs or learning communities to support all students?

### Understand the Barriers to Achieving the Vision

With post-it notes, begin to anticipate where you might encounter barriers to the vision. Jot down those ideas on post-its and place them on the storyboard where the barrier will arise. Use the questions to guide identifying barriers.

- Where are there gaps between current practice and the vision?
- What competing priorities or initiatives might make the vision challenging?
- Does the location of services become a physical barrier for students?

### Identify Transactional Work that Support Staff Can Take On or Technology Can Automate

- List out transactional work that does not require a counselor.
- What transactional work can be included in the responsibilities of student services classified staff?
- What transactional work could be programmed into early alert or scheduling technology programs?

# Define What Equitable Counseling Looks Like for Your College

Develop a shared definition of equitable counseling. Then unpack the definition of equitable counseling by roles, responsibilities, and experiences.

- What will counselors do and how will the work be structured?
- How will counselors collaborate with student services classified staff? Are there teams that need to be created to ensure that collaboration?
- What support will counselors need from leadership?
- How might the practices of counselors working with special programs like EOP&S, Umoja, and Puente be scaled to support all students?

# Plan to Move the Work Forward



After developing a vision and values for defining the direction of an equitable counseling model, it is important to establish a plan to move the work forward:

- Set clear and achievable goals.
- Identify activities that support reaching those goals.
- Tie each goal to a timeline and person responsible.
- Identify time needed to do the work.
- Leverage outside support when needed to keep moving forward—losing momentum can lead to frustration.
- Celebrate the changes even when small.

**Equity Design Tip:** *Design for students furthest from opportunity. Discuss who that student is for your college. Then make sure that your short-term and long-term goals are in service of the students furthest from opportunity.*

Vision: *Write your vision statement at the top of your planning documents to keep you focused.*

Long-term goal #1:					
Sample: Collaborate across student services to operationalize offering students coordinated, holistic support.					
Short term goals	Timeline	Activities	Resources Needed	Lead	Milestone to be communicated and celebrated
Develop a plan for coordinated support	Fall 2024	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish a cross-functional workgroup including students.</li> <li>• Identify a lead.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time to meet bimonthly.</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of the team.</li> <li>• Draft of the plan.</li> <li>• Incorporation of feedback.</li> </ul>