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Published online: 30 Nov 2020.

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Using Institutional Planning to Support Men of Color in Community College

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have brought an increasing amount of attention to the educational experiences and outcomes for men of color. As a group, these students experience some of the lowest rates of success in community college. These inequities in education start early, fueled by racial/gender dynamics, stereotyping, and growing up in under-resourced communities. With these known barriers facing men of color, there are few policy initiatives developed explicitly to address these students. More generally, states have passed reforms to improve completion and attainment that may support men of color. This paper examines California's Student Equity Policy (SEP), an initiative seeking to mitigate equity gaps in community college, to see if and how implementation benefits men of color in community college. The policy required community colleges to assess inequities by race and gender as well as other demographics to identify gaps in success then develop a *student equity plan* with goals and solutions to mitigate them. Through critical policy analysis, the authors document the opportunities in these equity plans to address men of color by examining 42 community colleges in the state. Although men of color were identified 33% of the time as facing inequity, we found only 6% of activities in these plans explicitly addressed them. Based on these results we provide promising practices that offer ways to support men of color in community college and conclude with recommendations to better utilize policy as a tool to improve the equity gaps for these students.

Increased attention has been placed on conditions, experiences, and outcomes men of color face in community college. For a myriad of reasons, men of color[1] (MOC) face constant disadvantages from the start of their educational trajectories. Howard et al. (2017) shares that these challenges begin at birth with disproportionate rates of infant mortality, chronic poverty, and under resourced communities. These systemic inequities persist over time from disproportionate disciplinary rates in elementary grades (Smith & Harper, 2015; Valencia, 2012), disparate high school dropout rates (Harper & Williams, 2013; Rios, 2011), challenges to college access (Rodríguez & Greer, 2017), as well as unwelcoming campus climates (Jenkins et al., 2020; Serrano, 2020) that create constant barriers to persisting in and completing community college.

Recent scholarship has taken aim at improving the outcomes for young men of color in community college. Scholars focus on three strands: a) documenting the experiences men of color (Harris & Wood, 2013; Sáenz & Ponjuan, 2009), b) reframing the narrative of what success looks like (Harper & Wood, 2015; Howard et al., 2017), and offering policy solutions and potential structural and programmatic interventions (Harper & Harris III, 2012; Serrano, 2020). In combination, these efforts seek to reframe the narrative on men of color by describing the assets possessed, shifting the focus to societal and institutional barriers that hinder their success, and highlighting promising practices that

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can better support these students. Although there has been a proliferation of studies on men of color in higher education, the focus has been primarily on experiences and outcomes in four-year institutions (Harris & Wood, 2013). Given their open access enrollment, community colleges are positioned as critical entry points to higher education for minoritized communities, especially men of color. At community college, the experiences of men of color are less known, although they face severe equity gaps in basic skills progression, degree completion, and transfer success rates (F. Harris et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2015).

In California, the state has passed several efforts to improve the outcomes for men of color, including sponsoring the Alliance for Boys and Men of Color focused on removing barriers to opportunity, developing promising practices across the educational pipeline, as well as specific reform efforts to transform experiences in the community college system (Philpart & Bell, 2015). These efforts continue with state policymakers, philanthropic organizations, and educational researchers seeking effective programs and practices that improve the success of men of color in high schools and colleges (Education Trust-West, 2017). A major effort being implemented in California is the Student Equity Policy. This policy requires all community colleges in the state to examine five academic areas which include access, basic skills progression, course completion, transfer to a four-year institution, and degree completion. Within these five academic areas, there are six mandated student groups to disaggregate data and identify inequity for, including racially minoritized students, women, low-income, foster youth, veterans, and students with disabilities (Student equity plans, Ca. Stat. § 78220, 2014). Since its initial approval in 2014, the state has allocated over 680 USD million dollars for campuses to develop new strategies and practices to overcome student inequities (Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018). Since race and gender are two focal areas of the reform, the Student Equity Policy offers the opportunity to explicitly address men of color. Thus, our interest is in understanding how community colleges in California leverage the policy to address inequities facing men of color. More specifically, we question if men of color are identified and targeted in the planning process and, if at all, how are the equity funds used to benefit men of color benefit in community college?

Purpose of the Study

This study examines how community colleges enact state-level policy to improve equity on campus for men of color. With the window of opportunity created by the policy, we explored how the student equity plans created by community colleges were developed and implemented to address the challenges faced by these men. The focus was placed on how student equity plans, as formulated by the state, and implemented by institutions, can benefit the men of color enrolled in community college. Specifically, we examined data on 42 California community colleges, collected from a larger project conducted by the Center for Urban Education and Minority Male Community College Collaborative,[2] to first understand how the policy was being used to address the barriers facing men of color, and second, highlight any promising practices, which we describe as culturally relevant strategies with accountability measures for institutions to address the inequities on campus discovered during the analytical process. The purpose of the study was two-fold: provide a landscape analysis of the ways student equity plans are used to improve the conditions, experiences, and outcomes for men of color in community college, while also highlighting promising practices to transform outcomes within the California Community Colleges (CCC) for men of color. This analysis was guided by the prompts:

- Are men of color identified and addressed in the student equity plans?
- If men of color are identified as experiencing disproportionate impact, do the proposed activities correspond to their needs?
- What type of activities are developed to address inequities facing men of color?

Men of color in California's community colleges

Community colleges fulfill a unique, yet necessary, mission within higher education. Due to their open-access admissions policies, they enroll a larger proportion of low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized[3] students (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Castro & Cortez, 2017). As a result, they also serve a disproportionate number of students who have faced constant disadvantage and inequality throughout their educational trajectory (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). Malcom (2013) adds that community colleges are the *de facto* minority-serving education sector. And yet, the funding received per student is considerably less in comparison to those of four-year public and private college and universities. (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Hence, it is perhaps unsurprising that community colleges have disappointing rates of success in basic skills progression, degree completion, and transfer attainment (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Melguizo et al., 2011). For students who first enrolled in community college in 2011–2012, only 8% completed a certificate, 18% had completed an associate's degree, 31% transferred to a four-year institution, and 13% had completed a bachelor's degree at any institution within 6 years (Chen et al., 2019; National Student Clearinghouse, 2019). These rates of success are even lower when disaggregated by gender and racial characteristics (McNair et al., 2020).

The state of California has the largest community college system in the nation, with 115 campuses serving over 2.1 million students (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2020). Men of color are overwhelmingly concentrated in community college with 83% of all Black and 82% of all Latino men enrolled in California public postsecondary education (L. Wood & Harris, 2016). Furthermore, men of color face major challenges with respect to persistence, transfer, and graduation given high rates of placement in remedial education, low support with educational aspirations, and interaction with institutional policies, structures, and practices that may not be culturally sustaining for these students (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Paris, 2015). These factors have created unequal conditions through racialized and gendered pathways that produce inequities in experiences and educational outcomes (Carnevale & Strothel, 2013).

Significant equity gaps persist for men of color in basic skills progression – moving through the developmental sequence to college-level courses – in community college. Examining the most recent six-year cohort data (2010–2011), men of color comprise 30.3% of all students enrolled in the state's community college system (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2020). The overall persistence rate – progressing from second to third consecutive semester – is 75.9%, but Black, Native American, Latinx,[4] and Pacific Islander men experience significantly lower rates.[5] For men of color, the transfer-level Mathematics "success[6]" rate was 28% and for women of color it was 32%, in comparison to the state average progression rate of 34.2%. Of all groups disaggregated by race and ethnicity, Black and Native American men had the lowest rates of progression to transfer-level math, with equity gaps over 10 percentage points from the state average (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2020). These rates were not much better in transfer-level English progression. The state average was 46.9%, but men of color in aggregate had a success rate of 39%. In this area, Black and Native American men had the lowest progression rates with 29.5% and 34.2%, respectively. Reporting these rates are necessary as developmental education has been found to work as a *cyclical trap* keeping students of color stuck in pre-transfer-level courses (Felix et al., 2018). As a consequence, educational goals, such as attaining an associate degree or transferring to a four-year institution, are stifled by low outcomes faced by men of color (Rodriguez et al., 2019). Lastly, examining state-level transfer data, known as "Transfer Velocity," men of color once again experienced inequitable outcomes in transfer success as compared to peers (Hayward, 2011, p. 22). Transfer velocity tracks cohort-level data for a period of 6 years. The most recent cohort, 2012–2013, Black and Latinx men had the lowest transfer rates of all groups disaggregated by race and ethnicity. This aligns with recent work that found Black and Latinx men face additional challenges on the "long journey" (Peña & Rhoads, 2019, p. 186) to transfer such as imposed differential aspiration by counselors (Maldonado, 2019), balancing education with responsibility of supporting family through work (Vasquez Urias & Wood, 2014), and lacking

approachable and culturally responsive faculty, curriculum, and practices (Bivens & Wood, 2016; J. L. Wood & Ireland, 2014).

This snapshot on *success* outcomes for men of color are shared to document the persistent inequity faced by these students. By describing the state of men of color in California's community college system, our focus to critically examine recent state policy developed to address student inequity becomes more evident and necessary. As described earlier, Student Equity Policy, required colleges to document the inequities on their campus, propose goals and activities to mitigate identified gaps, and described how policy-specific funds would be used toward those ends. The following section outlines the theoretical framework and methods used to analyze how community colleges developed their equity plans and if and how they identified, addressed, and funded activities to tackle the inequities facing men of color on their campus.

Theoretical framework

Critical policy analysis (CPA) was employed to examine the student equity plans submitted across the state to understand which groups are identified as facing disproportionate levels of inequity, the activities and strategies proposed to address equity gaps, and the ways new funding were allocated to implement the Student Equity Policy (Chase, 2016; Ching et al., 2018; Felix & Trinidad, 2020). Unlike traditional forms of policy analysis, which assume a rational-scientific framework, CPA begins with the idea that policies are inherently biased and value-laden (Bacchi, 1999; Young & Diem, 2017). CPA foregrounds dimensions such as race or gender in the analysis of policy and attempts to uncover issues of power, social reproduction, racism or sexism. Taking a CPA approach allows us to foreground race to study the student equity plans and to consider how the policy may differentially impact MOC. Critical policy analysis is commonly used by policy researchers seeking to understand deeper, sometimes silenced, meanings of policy and its implementation (Castro, 2015; Chase, 2016; Iverson, 2007). The development of student equity plans, like any other document, report, or plan, does not exist in silo of its social construct. Although the intent to benefit all is there, the socio-political realities promote access to certain student categories as beneficiaries in such plan (e.g., white students) and disfavors others (e.g., men of color). For example, Iverson (2007) shows how university diversity policies that were meant to convey an institutional commitment to creating inclusive environments for all students constructed students of color as outsiders, disadvantaged victims, and commodities. Iverson's study positioned race as the central issue of interest to understanding the dominant discourse around diversity planning, discovering how deficit-based beliefs regarding people of color produced the strategies in these plans intended to improve their experiences. Such variation in enactment of policy results from vagueness in the language and the discretion for practitioners to widely interpret its meaning (Yanow, 2007). Thus, the plans can be seen as artifacts that are infused with the meanings and values institutions hold about equity and improving the conditions for men of color. Additionally, what the plans leave out – or stay silent on – needs to be acknowledged, analyzed and problematized as an active choice for what holds value for that institution (Martinez-Aleman, 2015).

Methods

Data were drawn from publicly available documents including formal policy documents, implementation memos and training guidelines, and particularly, the individual student equity plans (Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018). These data enable us to analyze the conceptualization and contents of plans submitted across the state. This study draws from a subset of state equity plans within the state. To narrow the scope of this study, we used a purposeful sampling strategy to identify community colleges in three geographic areas in the state that had above-average enrollment of men of color and below-average success rates (Creswell, 2009). The sample includes 42 community colleges out of the 113 in the state. Specific regions with above-average enrollment of men of color were the Greater Los Angeles

area, the Inland Empire, and Central Valley. Although only 37% of all community colleges in the state, sample institutions enrolled 45% of all men of color. Funding for their planning efforts ranged from 333,000 USD to 3.3 USD million; combined sample institutions received 48% of all the equity funds across the state in 2015–16. This stems from the funding formula developed by the state to provide more resources to institutions that enroll larger proportions of *vulnerable student groups* including low-income and students of color (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, 2019).

Data analysis proceeded in three stages by the researchers. First, they developed an assessment framework to evaluate the student equity plans based on previous studies (Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018; Strunk et al., 2016). The framework was then tested on a plan not included in the sample to see how it helped to answer the research questions. Second, we reviewed the 42 equity plans across the state using the protocol. The researchers wrote memos as they coded to capture emerging insights and themes and to synthesize the reported findings. Lastly, we conducted a focused coding process that identified the targeting of men of color within the student equity plans. The analysis led us to the development of salient themes around equity and the outcome gaps faced by men of color and the ways these institutional equity plans attempt to mitigate identified disparities.

Results

The purpose of this study was to understand how community colleges used the Student Equity Policy to identify and address the inequities faced by men of color. In what follows, we share some descriptive data about the plans in the sample, detail two emerging themes from the analysis process, and include identified practices that can serve as examples to improve student equity for men of color in community college.

Addressing inequity: identification and action

As described earlier, the Student Equity Policy required every community college in the state to develop a student equity plan that a) identified inequity and b) developed activities (i.e., interventions) to improve outcomes for student groups. The results reported draw from the activities proposed in the 42 student equity plans reviewed. There were 923 initiatives proposed across the sample plans attempting to mitigate student equity gaps on campus. During the analysis process, activities were categorized into three types: all, identified, and explicit. The first type includes *all* 923 activities proposed in the sample. The second type includes a third of all activities (295), which only *identified* disproportionate impact for men of color, but did not necessarily propose a targeted intervention to support men of color. The third category included activities that *explicitly* centered men of color in the equity activity and described strategies to improve their student success, of which only 60 (6%) of all activities did (See Table 1). Out of the 42 community colleges, only 27 plans explicitly named MOC as a target group. In total only 60 activities explicitly named and addressed MOC as a target group. These activities were found in only 27 plans of the 42 in the sample. The other 15 community colleges did not explicitly name equity concerns and proposed activities for men of color in their equity plan descriptions.

We developed these categories to make the distinction that activities are crafted differently within the student equity plans. Aligned with recent research examining racial equity policies (Bensimon & Felix, 2019; Ching et al., 2018; Winkle-Wagner et al., 2014) and how they benefit racially minoritized

Table 1. Snapshot of proposed equity plan activities.

Activity Category	#	% of Plans
Proposed Across All Equity Plans	923	100%
Identified MOC Inequity	295	32%
Explicitly Addressed MOC Inequity	60	6%

students, we recognize that equity activities tend to take an *equity for all* approach. This omission of race in equity plan activities – not identifying or mentioning men of color – leads to the development of efforts that will not explicitly address the inequities faced by this specific group (Pollock, 2001, 2004).

In addition to categorizing activities into three types, we examined how these plan activities addressed specific educational areas. Within the planning process, institutions were required to develop activities across six academic indicators such as basic skills progression, degree completion, and transfer success. Figure 1 displays the ways the equity planning process was used to address inequity across these educational indicators. Across all activities, institutions concentrated their efforts on improving Basic Skills and Course Completion. For activities that identified men of color facing equity, the concentration in basic skills was even higher, nearly one-third of all activities addressed this issue. For the explicit-activities, the focus was on improving complete course rates and second campus-wide efforts.

The middle set of bars in Figure 1 shows all 295 activities that identified men of color as facing inequity in educational outcomes. Of note is the concentration of inequity found in basic skills for men of color, with nearly one-third of all gaps identified falling in that category. What is surprising is that the focus on basic skills progression did not carry over to equity activities that explicitly-addressed men of color. Here was a missed opportunity for institutions in the sample to use their actionable data as a catalyst for change that benefited men of color on their campus.

Promise practices, few and far between

Focusing on the 60 explicit activities addressing men of color, we further disaggregated based on the language used in the analyzed equity plans (See Table 2). This was important to understand if institutions were focusing on all men of color or specific combinations of the activities proposed to improve outcomes. As an aggregate term, "men of color" was used the most in activities with 17 mentions. Black men were referenced 16 times as a specific group to target. The third most referred group where both Black and Latinx men with 13 references. For, Latinx men there were nine activities that primarily focused on them.
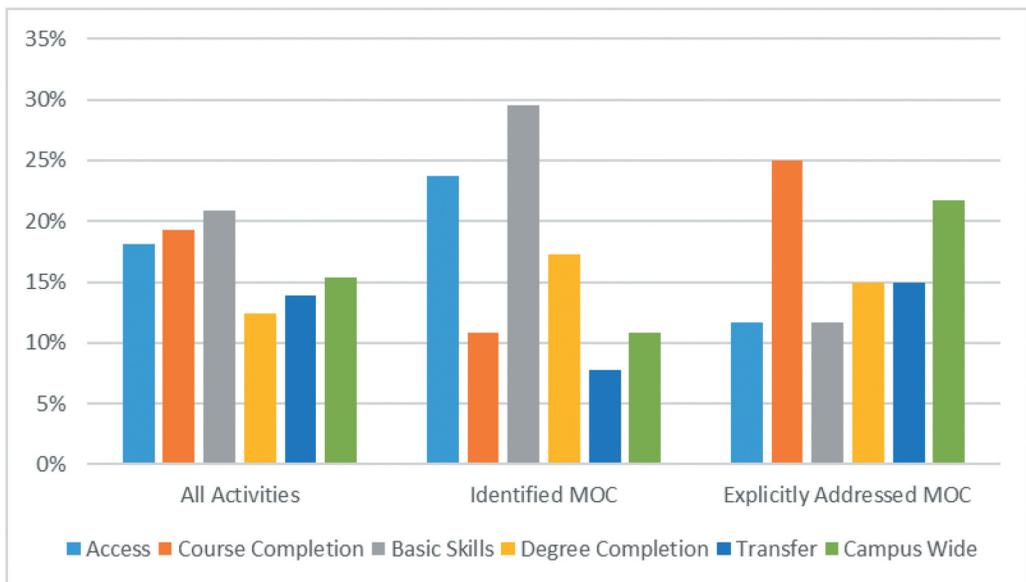

Figure 1. Activities proposed in equity plans by type.

Table 2. Explicit Equity Activities for Men of Color.

Identified Group	# of Activities
Men of Color	17
African American Men Only	16
Latinx and African American Men	13
Latinx Men Only	9
Minority Men	3
African American, Latinx, and Asian Pacific Islander Men	1
African American, Latinx, and Native American Men	1
Total	60

As for the language used in the interventions, and solutions proposed, much of it was framed in ways that blamed the students for the inequities experienced. A deficit perspective undergirds many of the activities directed at MOC. Undoubtedly, MOC, like other groups who have been deprived of high-quality education and resources, can benefit from direct support services. However, institutional practices and practitioners also need remediation, and many activities aimed at "all students" do not support the basic concept of equity or address MOC in culturally relevant ways. The solutions proposed intended to 1) focus on student support and services rather evaluation and assessment, institutional capacity building, or practitioner development, and 2) did not target the specific student groups experiencing equity gaps. Without improving these aspects of the student equity plans, the proposed solutions will not be based on data and evidence from the context of each college setting, as intended by the SEP's bottom-up approach, and will focus on students' perceived deficits rather than institutional barriers to equity. Furthermore, if activities are not culturally relevant and deliberately focused on the student groups experiencing equity gaps, it is unlikely gaps will be mitigated. These findings suggest the SEP will need to provide support and training to increase the capacity of institutions and practitioners to create equity-minded, data-driven, evidence-based, and culturally relevant solutions (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012).

Talk isn't cheap; sometimes it's expensive

In aggregate, all 42 community colleges received over 57 million dollars to address inequity on their campus through the planning process. For the 6% of activities that explicitly described ways to address men of color, 5.6 million dollars was allocated. The average activity was allocated 95,000 dollars. Below we highlight three activities that placed both an emphasis on men of color and also a substantial amount of resources toward improving the outcomes. These activities also were dedicated toward institutional capacity-building, professional development, and research and evaluation activities necessary for developing evidence-based and impactful interventions for disproportionately impacted student groups.

One college allocated 450,000 USD to improve the outcomes for Latino and African-American Men. Their proposed solutions included having faculty go through "math equity activities focused on increasing the awareness of equity gaps among African American and Latino men." In addition to that, "faculty leaders will be attempting to identify specific causes of such equity gaps and formulate faculty and student workshops to address these issues." Beyond professional development for staff, "Latino and African-American male students [were] targeted for workshops that will encourage the development of a growth mindset and the use of student support resources." Another focused on course completion for Latino and African-American men population. The campuses intervention stated, "Currently, there are no dedicated staff and no available student support services or instructional interventions for men of color. Integrated support services are critical for course and degree completion, especially for the *underprepared* Latino and African-American men population who tend to enroll in noncredit vocational courses (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015). In order to optimize course completion, this project proposes counseling services that include in-class tutoring and support services such as educational and career guidance. It's important to note that although the activity

may focus on a specific group, the underlying cause for the inequity may still be attributed to students in deficit ways since many of the activities labeled men of color as being "underprepared."

A third campus prioritized 454,050 USD toward developing a Men of Color academy to improve persistence and graduation rates. They shared that the activity was both a student service and a professional development opportunity. For men of color the "Men of Color Campaign would promote access, completion, and transfer" while faculty and staff would go through a series of professional development workshops to "develop equity-minded professionals that can better serve students including things such as culturally responsive training, safe spaces, and others." Developing new strategies and practices that make a difference are costly, the colleges highlighted not only proposed ideas on paper to improve outcomes for MOC but also distributed substantial fiscal resources to realize the practices on campus.

The search for promising practices

Over the last decade there have been various recommendations for supporting men of color. Recent literature has suggested the need for outreach programs beginning earlier in the educational pipeline (Abrica et al.,, 2019; Sáenz et al., 2016; Serrano, 2020), creating and placing men of color in learning communities with equity-minded faculty (Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2019), and study skills courses that equip students with skills such as time management, test preparation strategies, and awareness of campus resource (Harris et al., 2017; J. L. Wood & Ireland, 2014). One of the objectives of this study was to uncover if and how community colleges were using the equity planning process to improve the conditions and outcomes of men of color. Our hope was to find promising practices[7] that were tailored for men of color, used culturally relevant strategies, and placed the onus on the institutions to address the inequities on campus.

This last section provides examples from these equity plans as potential opportunities to improve the conditions and outcomes for men of color through equity activities and equity funding provided to institutions. Below we share two examples in the areas of basic skills progression, degree completion, and transfer. We first present activities proposed by different community colleges, then describe the ways the intervention fits the explicit category, and how it may benefit men of color.

Basic skills progression

As scholars have found, racially minoritized students in general, and men of color specifically, are disproportionately placed in developmental courses (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015). Within the Student Equity Policy, basic skills progression encompasses three areas, English, Math, and English as a Second Language (ESL). Once placed in basic skills, men of color must take anywhere between 1–4 additional courses to reach *college-level* and receive credit toward a degree or transfer eligibility. One of the findings of this study was the significant identification of men of color as facing inequity in basic skills and developmental education, but limited examples of efforts proposed to improve conditions.

One college in the sample focused on expanding outreach efforts for men of color through a summer program. As described, the purpose of the activity was to transition students, increase academic preparedness, and connect them with peers. An example of this was:

> The college will expand outreach efforts to increase the number of men of color and foster youth that participate in the College Summer Advantage Program. The goal is to increase ESL/basic skills completion for Hispanic males and African American males. The extended summer orientation is designed to help cohort students acclimate to a college environment and to feel better prepared for fall term. Connecting cohort students to college resources, categorical programs, and key college personnel promotes a sense of belonging and being valued– critical factors in college persistence.

The second example in the area of basic skills was planning and developing more professional development for faculty to understand the specific needs of Black and Latinx men. Specifically, the institution created an equity activity to improve how math is taught to men of color to improve their practices:

> Currently, Math Equity activities have focused on increasing the awareness of equity among African American and Latino men. In addition to that, faculty leaders will be attempting to identify specific causes of such equity gaps and formulate faculty workshops to address these issues. Additional workshop-focused opportunities will assist faculty in developing more effective strategies to identify and engage students experiencing disproportionate impact.

Both these examples fall under the explicit category for centering men of color in the proposed activity, focusing on remediating practice, not students, and recognizing the need for programs and resources that take into account the experiences of the target group.

Degree completion

The second set of examples are provided in the area of degree completion which focuses on activities that promote the attainment of an associate's degree. Looking at the state's completion rate, men of color consistently experienced lower rates of success for those seeking a certificate or degree. In the analysis, practices that targeted degree completion focused on three types of activities. The first was the investment in new student information systems to be able to better track progress and proactively monitor when students reach momentum points. The second includes developing peer-mentoring programs and learning communities to support groups in their educational progress. The third set of activities focused on the type of counseling that was provided to students. Below are two examples of promising practices in the area of degree completion for men of color:

> [College] will develop and implement a peer-mentoring program for African American males to improve retention, graduation, and transfer. The Student Equity Coordinator will collaborate with The Talented Tenth program (T3P) Faculty Coordinator to launch a two-part initiative for improving success rates of African American males. The first component of this initiative is the creation of a mentor-training program ... The coordinator will develop all training content and materials, and will lead activities.

> [College] will develop a targeted milestone intervention for Latino and African American male students. 1) Inviting Latino and African American male students during their first semester to learn about SSSP, develop a comprehensive SEP; 2) Students will be matched with a Counselor mentor who will actively reach out to students at designated 'milestones', and provide personalized guidance throughout the process of selecting an educational goal and successful completion of program requirements, until the student is ready to petition for graduation and/or a certificate completion.

These activities are shared as promising practices for their focus on the institution's responsibility to address student inequity, commitment to using equity resources to support men of color, and the use of mentoring to promote persistence and completion. Specifically, mentoring programs for men of color have been found to not only create a more welcoming climate but develop a peer group that supports each other to and through graduation (Harper, 2013).

Transfer preparation

Within the community college context, transfer preparation and successfully transitioning to a baccalaureate-granting institution is critical. Although men of color have high aspirations to transfer, the rates do not follow. Given the opportunity to identify and address transfer inequity through the SEP, there were only a few instances where colleges developed coherent strategies that considered ways to increase outcomes for men of color. We share two promising practices that stood out during the analysis phase. The first activity focuses on creating a first-year cohort. The second develops an activity to leverage existing, culturally relevant programs for men of color to improve transfer awareness, preparation, and completion:

> The goal is for the number of African American and Latino males who successfully complete transfer requirements and gain acceptance at a four-year university to increase by at least 5% within 3 years by 1) Working with First Year Experience cohorts to provide supports, including embedded tutoring, counseling, workshops, and specialized programming to celebrate cultural differences; 2) Increasing recruitment efforts providing outreach to Latino students, particularly males; 3) Creating an active and robust mentoring component for Latino and African American students; 4) Engaging students in social and community-related activities.

The second example serves as a model of an explicit activity for men of color. This college planned to increase transfer rates by outlining specific goals and detailing how they would work with specific culturally based associations to build transfer pathways for men of color:

> To increase persistence and motivate students to complete transfer requirements, the college will identify opportunities for cohort students to attend educational conferences and events that promote higher education attainment. The types of conferences students may attend are the UMOJA statewide conference and the national Hispanic Association of College and Universities (HACU) annual conference. The annual UMOJA statewide student conference is an opportunity for African American students to enhance their cultural and educational experiences. The HACU conference attracts over 3,000 faculty, administrators, staff, and students each year. The purpose of the conference is to discuss policy issues affecting education opportunities for Hispanic students, emerging trends in higher education, and best practices for Hispanic Serving Institutions.

Similar to other academic indicator areas, the examples in transfer showcase activities that explicitly named men of color, committed resources to improving outcomes, and attempted to ground their activities in culturally relevant programs. As highlighted, very few plans in the study developed explicit activities that centered men of color. Only 6% of the 923 activities in the sample specifically proposed interventions to address their inequities. With limited examples, it was important to showcase some promising practices that were developed through the equity planning process.

Recommendations, implications, and significance

The California Community College system has been provided ample resources, totaling over 680 USD million between 2014 and 2019, to make major strides to close equity gaps, such as those that exist for men of color (Legislative Analyst Office, 2019). This has resulted in increasing existing programs capacity to creating new innovative initiatives focusing at various institutional levels. By requiring community colleges to develop equity plans, the SEP creates a space for close examination of basic skills progression, degree completion and transfer rates for men of color, meaningful conversations on why these students face disparate outcomes, and strategic development of interventions that promise to eliminate the inequities they experience.

This study explored a sample of student equity plans in the state to learn what student groups were most disproportionately impacted, the interventions colleges developed to address identified equity gaps, and how specifically funds were allocated to achieve these goals. The focus was placed on understanding if, and how, these equity plans were used to address and support men of color in community college in three geographic areas. Moving from research to practice, we provide some recommendations for ways that community colleges can use their student equity plans and funding to most effectively support men of color. The first recommendation asks institutions developing plans that education inequity is a problem of practice, not students (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012). Second, is the realization that addressing racial disparities in community college is a high-resource endeavor that requires colleges to put a significant amount of funds toward that process. The third is that practitioners developing these equity plans propose strategies that are directly aligned with groups facing disproportionate impact; generalized solutions will not remedy race-specific inequities. We urge community colleges to consult with their shared governance constituent groups; students, faculty, classified staff, and administrators to carry out their equity plan efforts.

Institutional accountability in equity planning

It is without doubt that transformative change needs to be situated as a responsibility for institutional leaders. Inequities on campus should be seen as problems of practice rather than an exercise in remediating students. Campuses should address disproportionate student groups in specific ways instead of a student success for all approach. In order for the equity planning process to address and potentially improve outcomes for men of color, there is a need to build the capacity for equity work. Dowd and Bensimon (2015) argue that intuitions operate in a manner that sees disparities and

outcomes as problems rooted in students. These notions tend to be more harmful to groups such as men of color. Instead, there is a need for institutions to develop mechanisms that identify inequities, develop actionable data, and prioritize efforts that can close gaps for racially minoritized students.

Based on these findings, it is important for community colleges to seize this policy opportunity as a way to finally address racial disparities. The equity planning process allows for institutions to identify areas where student groups are facing gaps in success. As described earlier, there is clear evidence that men of color face barriers in at least three of the five areas in the policy. Colleges must use this data inquiry process to provide the campus with actionable evidence to restructure current practices. Data must be presented and made available for practitioners to utilize intentionally as they develop practices across their services. We suggest presenting data findings at key governance meetings, and campus-wide events (i.e., convocation, symposiums, and accreditation team meetings). Once racial-equity gaps are identified, especially disparate ones, implementers are less likely to ignore the compelling evidence in front of them and work toward developing specific interventions to improve equity for men of color.

Seeing student equity as an opportunity to address racial disparities

The Student Equity Policy has now provided consistent funding over the last 5 years to support community colleges' in their approach to reducing inequities on campus. This analysis provides evidence that institutions are not using their resources in ways that target student groups found to face the largest equity gaps. To improve how funding is used in the equity planning process, it may be necessary to share a new perspective on resource allocation and targeting specific groups. As a policy goal, equity is one of the most ambiguous terms to define (Blanchard, 1986). As it relates to planning, institutional leaders must be provided with new examples of how equity can be addressed and ways that funds can be spent. Building from Rawls (1971) and Dowd and Bensimon (2015), equity in this context should be about distributive justice. This type of equity recognizes that some students will need more resources than others, although the distribution may be unequal, it is seen as equitable.

Recently, Harris et al. (2017) released recommendations for institutions to embed equity in their planning process. Two strategies align directly with our work. The first is the need to acknowledge race and stark racial disparities that exist. In higher education, there are prevalent notions of equity that equate the term to fairness and treating all students the same (McNair et al., 2020). This race-evasive understanding of equity renders race invisible and silences the historic and current barriers faced by men of color. We recommend having discussions on campus about why targeting specific groups such as men of color or veterans or foster youth, is not only necessary but also the appropriate approach to improving equity in community college (Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018). Equity efforts on campus should embed a racial-equity framework that helps address equity gaps for racialized student populations. This means, leaders at community colleges must constantly center racial inequity when engaging in campus-wide conversations, planning, and practice. The second recommendation is to clearly and explicitly develop strategies, programs, and practices that are race-conscious. Campus leaders overseeing equity planning should be encouraged to create tailored interventions for men of color, rather than general activities that "support all students." As campuses continue to implement their equity plans, state-based and external organizations will similarly need to provide support and training to increase the capacity of institutions and practitioners to create true equity-minded, data-driven, evidence-based, and culturally relevant practices to support men of color. To improve race-specific strategies, institutions must adopt a critical perspective that a) acknowledges race and structural racism, b) makes student success an institutional responsibility, and c) takes action in ways that advance equity for marginalized student groups (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012). Without these competencies, planners in community college will continue to produce activities that take an all student approach. Evidence shows that although in theory, supporting all students is fair, these types of programs continue to leave behind certain groups (Gándara et al., 2012).

Countering deficit notions of men of color in community college

Serrano (2020), as well as Huerta and Fishman (2019), discuss the ways that faculty and staff hold deficit notions and lowered aspirations for men of color. Huerta and Fishman (2019) specifically found that Latino men are perceived as *being in gangs* or *not wanting to do anything with their lives*, limiting the type of support and resources being provided (Maldonado, 2019). As much as mentoring programs and culturally relevant curriculum are needed, there are structural and cultural aspects embedded in community college that deter men of color more than their readiness for advanced mathematics or transfer preparation (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012). Practitioners on campus must reflect on their beliefs, values, and perceptions of *who* deserves their support and who can succeed in community college (Bensimon, 2007). This focus, as a best practice, helps counter stigma and assumption on campus about men of color and what they can achieve in community college. Equity efforts should not only address ways to better support men of color in their social, emotional, and academic development, but also counter toxic climates on campus. Bensimon (2007); Bensimon & Malcom (2012)) recommends practitioners, reflect on their equity-minded competencies: how they understand race, structural racism in higher education, and the barriers to success faced by racially minoritized students. Equity-mindedness requires that community college practitioners "accept that higher education as an institution is racialized and that structural racism is produced by everyday practices" that tend to go unexamined (Felix et al., 2015, p. 38).

If this policy is truly a means to improving equity in community college, then implementers need to be equipped with knowledge and competencies related to equity, racial disparities, redistribution of resources, and what specifically works for men of color. There needs to be an investment in robust professional development that provides the tools necessary to develop an equity-minded lens that can address the inequities facing our most minoritized students, including men of color. The support provided cannot be a one-time initiative, but moreover, a continuous development process where not only key stakeholders attend and participate, but where all campus constituents are provided access to language, concepts, frameworks, and tools to discuss institutional equity outcomes.

Conclusion

The student equity plans represent a window into how community colleges interpret equity gaps experienced by men of color and how they attempt to remediate them. As a state-level policy tool, the student equity plan allows California Community Colleges to examine educational opportunity and achievement for specific populations, as well as improving educational outcomes. This study attempted to capture the salience of men of color in these equity plans, the amount of funding allocated to activities specifically designated, and the kinds of activities proposed to improve their experiences and outcomes explicitly. Long-term improvements to community college require the combination of good policies, funding to motivate change and practitioners with skills to move reform efforts from paper to practice. The findings shared and recommendations provided seek to improve how the Student Equity Policy is implemented in community college. Specifically, to embed a more critical sense of equity in the planning process, share ways to develop activities that are targeted, allow the use of fiscal resources to benefit specific groups, and expand the possibility for these efforts to be a catalyst that eradicates inequity experienced by men of color in community college.

Notes

1. Men of color in this paper includes Black, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and Native American students.
2. See F. Harris et al. (2017) for additional details

3. We use *minoritized* instead of *minority* throughout this paper to signify that persons are not born into a minority status, but are subordinated and rendered into minority positions by US social institutions.

4. Latinx is used as a term to replace *Latina/o* recognizing the fluidity of gender identity and students that are trans* and gender non-conforming. The term *Hispanic* is not used interchangeably, but only as a descriptor of formal categories such as *Hispanic-Serving Institution*.

5. The author notes that the largest equity gap in persistence outcomes for the cohort examined were Native American Women. Although this paper focuses on men of color, it is important to make visible the inequities faced students at the intersections of race and gender.

6. Success is put in quotation to problematize the notion of *fait accompli* by state-level actors regarding what rates are seen as acceptable, such as only 28% of a student group progressing through developmental courses.

7. It's important to acknowledge the activities as promising practices, but realize that men of color carry multiple and complex identities; similarly institutions are situated in a particular context that may facilitate opportunities to be more race/gender conscious in their approach.

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