Counterstories of Policy Implementation: Using Reform to Address Latinx Student Equity

Eric R. Felix & Ray Ramirez

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Eric R. Felix [ID][a] and Ray Ramirez[b,c]

[a]College of Education, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA; [b]Office of Student Equity and Success, Fresno City College; [c]ARPE Department, San Diego State University

ABSTRACT

We highlight how community colleges implement equity-oriented reform to address inequities facing Latinx students. Through counterstorytelling, we provide lessons learned on the implementation and impact of equity-oriented reform in community college. Key findings revealed that the reform is necessary, but not sufficient to improve racial equity for Latinx students, thus requiring campuses and practitioners to move beyond the margins of superficial efforts and compliance. Implications are shared on how to embed the concept of equity-mindedness to increase Latinx student success into the cultural and structural fabric of the institution.

Whether as researchers, practitioners, or engaged community members, our energies have focused on improving the educational attainment of Latinx students. Our advocacy and research interests are informed by our lived experience in response to the fact that while the Latinx population is one of the fastest and largest growing populations in the US, we are underrepresented amongst degree-earners across the education pipeline from certificates and bachelor's degrees to graduate education (Fry, 2002; Langenkamp & Hoyt, 2019; Perez Huber et al., 2015; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006). This paper draws from the experiences of two community college advocates involved with the implementation of equity-oriented state policy. We provide our experiences attempting to implement policy reform in ways that address Latinx inequity in community college. Ray, a full-time practitioner, brings a richness from the day-to-day and on-the ground experiences of using policy to make his campus a more equitable environment for the students he serves. Eric, a policy researcher, provides a state-wide analysis of student equity and how the policy has been used to address longstanding inequities facing Latinx students in community. Together, we bring diverse perspective that tell a story of policy implementation and ways community college practitioners can leverage reforms in ways to address the challenges facing Latinx students.

Latinx students in community college

Over the last forty years, access to higher education has grown for Latinx students, but these gains have been primarily in broad-access institutions like community colleges. Being concentrated in this sector can be challenging as community colleges have been regarded as the "contradictory college" in that they only create the illusion of educational mobility (Dougherty, 1994) while operating as sites of social and racial stratification that reflect society at large (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012; Brint & Karabel, 1989). Community colleges enroll more Latinx students compared to four-year institutions, but they are also the least resourced sector of higher education. In terms of fiscal resources, public and private

universities receive three and five times, respectively, more per student than community colleges (The Century Foundation, 2014). Hence, it is perhaps unsurprising that community colleges have the lowest completion rates of all postsecondary institutions; only 17% of students who begin education at a community college complete a bachelor's degree after six years. These rates of "success" are even lower for Latinx students (Jenkins & Fink, 2015), which underscores the importance of this study given the increasingly significant role community colleges play in reducing racial education equity gaps for students who transfer from a two-year to a four-year institution (Crisp & Nuñez, 2014). González (2015) adds that differences in fiscal support demonstrate a "de facto segregated system of higher education" that produces disparities in completion rates for students attending community colleges (p. 72). Latinx students who pursue a postsecondary education overwhelmingly begin their higher education journey at a public two-year community college, which faces multiple levels of stratification (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015). Thus, creating an environment where the neediest students facing long-standing inequity attend the most underresourced institutions (Kurlaender, 2006; Posselt et al., 2012; Solórzano et al., 2005). Ultimately, there is a disconnect between the Latinx students' aspirations and the ability to successfully transfer and attain a bachelor's degree.

In recent years, states have passed various reform efforts to improve how community colleges support students, address issues of inequity and increase degree completion (Levin & Kanter, 2013). These initiatives help institutions and practitioners address several challenges facing community college in areas such as remedial education, time-to-degree completion, and declining transfer rates (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016). Texas, for example, passed a *P-16* initiative known as *Closing the Gaps 2015*, intended to increase attainment and achievement rates – especially for Latinx students – by aligning state and local educational systems from preschool to postsecondary graduation (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016). Similarly, in 2011, Georgia announced the *Complete College Georgia* initiative to increase college completion through "improving access, shortening time to degree, and transformation remediation" (Complete College Georgia, 2017). California, the state with the largest community college system, recently enacted several higher education policies (i.e., Student Success Act, Student Transfer Achievement Reform Act, and the Basic Skills Initiative) including hundreds of millions of dollars to improve outcomes in community college.[1] Of the states mentioned, California is uniquely poised to address Latinx educational equity given its unparalleled fiscal support from the state legislature and guidelines from the Chancellor's Office to identify and mitigate inequity for racial and ethnic groups in community college.

Purpose of the study

The focus of this study is on one such policy, the Student Equity Policy (SEP) that required community colleges in California to develop an "equity plan" that documented the extent of inequity on each campus and proposed strategies to address those gaps in student success. Given the interchangeable language between the state-level reform (Student Equity Policy), the required institutional documentation (student equity plan), and coordination of resources to mitigate gaps (student equity program), we refer to these under the umbrella term, Student Equity efforts. Beginning in 2014, the Student Equity efforts required all community colleges to develop a plan by first assessing student success data in various areas (i.e., access, basic skills, transfer) by race and ethnicity, and other demographic characteristics. Colleges then used the data to identify specific student groups facing the largest gaps on campus and proposed new strategies or scaled up existing programs that could mitigate the identified gaps in student success outcomes. Recently, critiques have been made about these reform efforts seeking to improve student success outcomes in community colleges (Gordon, 2017; Kirp, 2018). One article garnered mass public attention, sharing that the state had "seen no substantial

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[1]Recognizing the need for better policies and funding strategies, the state of California has recently enacted educational reforms in K12 and community college that focus on improving structural barriers while providing additional resources for schools that enroll "high need" students (See Vasquez Heilig et al., 2014).

increases in community college completion rates despite passing a much-anticipated reform law and spending nearly 890 USD million in subsequent state appropriations, all aimed at bolstering student progress" (Ed Source, 2017, p. 1). In the piece, the author used a single data point, statewide completion rate, as the only indicator of reform success, documenting that the rate of associate degree completion over a five-year period had actually declined, despite millions of dollars invested in improving outcomes. This glaring, singular statistic overshadows the efforts of community college practitioners working on a daily basis to improve the conditions, experiences, and outcomes for students. Shortly after the publication, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) issued a four-page memorandum response that acknowldged they slow progress, but would also "re-double our efforts and approach with renewed urgency and intentionality" (CCCCO, 2017). This study highlights narratives related to these recent reform efforts, especially ones unable to be captured by research approaches that focus on quantitative data sets or static outcome measures. As scholars and researchers invested in community college success, we focused on providing a more comprehensive picture of the way student success reforms move from the state capital to community college and are carried out by practitioners for the benefit of students. This study helps to shed light on the complicated nature of improving outcomes in community college through policy and its implementation.

Given the opportunity provided by Student Equity, we are interested in sharing our experiences with efforts within individual campuses and across the system. As a state initiative, Student Equity offers community colleges the opportunity to be race-conscious in their planning and programming to mitigate gaps in student outcomes (Felix et al., 2018). Counter-narratives, as a research strategy, allow for the voices, experiences, and expertise of racially-minoritized people to be seen as legitimate voices within academic and social conversations (Rodríguez & Greer, 2017). We share an on-the-ground account of the student equity program in California community college; describing the challenges, opportunities, and lessons learned from being involved with policy and its implementation, as well as how other states can benefit from embedding equity in community colleges.

The equity planning process in California

The Student Equity efforts date back to 1992 when the Board of Governors (BOG) first adopted the policy as a way to increase "rates of student success in the state and avoid a permanent underclass largely composed of those from ethnic minorities" (Guichard, 1992, p. 5). However, it was not until 1996 when BOG established the need to complete an equity plan as a minimum standard to receive funding from the state. While there are records of several community colleges that developed an equity plan during this time, the Chancellor's Office did not provide guidance or funding to assist colleges in the development and implementation of these equity plans. Consequently, not all colleges were able to develop their equity plan, and the colleges that did lacked the fiscal and human resources capital to sustain Student Equity efforts. For nearly 20 years the policy went unfunded and underutilized. Due to the financial crisis of 2008, the Title 5 regulations requiring colleges to develop a student equity plan were suspended given the substantial budget cuts to categorical programs.[2]

As the national and state economy gradually improved, Student Equity efforts rekindled with the establishment of the California Community Colleges Student Success Taskforce (SST) in 2011. Findings from the SST were adopted by state policymakers in the form of the Student Success Act of 2012 (SB-1456). As a result of SB-1456 and the 2013 Student Equity Workgroup, the Governor and Legislature initially allocated 70 USD million of Student Equity funding to California community colleges (2014–15 Budget Trailer Bill) followed by an additional 100 USD million in Student Equity

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[2]Categorical programs are stipulated in California law and budget for specific use. Examples of categorical programs include, but not limited to, Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS), California Work Opportunities and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs), Disable Student Programs and Services (DSPS), and Student Success and Support Programs (SSSP), etc.

funding for the 2015–2016 fiscal year. With the renewed commitment from the Chancellor's Office and new categorical funds, colleges were required to submit Student Equity plans beginning fall 2014.

Since 2014, the state has invested over 650 million dollars to support the implementation of student equity effort and the proposed solutions emerging from these plans to mitigate student inequity in the following critical areas: basic skills (Developmental education English, ESL, and math), course completion (retention: successful completion of credit course for which a student received a recorded grade of A, B, C, or Credit), degree/certificate completion, and transfer. Additionally, the reform described specific policy targets which included eight racial/ethnic groups, women, students with disabilities, low-income students, foster youth, and veterans (Student equity plans, §78220, 2014). As one of the most recent policies passed in the state to address inequity in community college, the reform effort offers a unique opportunity to study how institutions implement equity-oriented policies to improve conditions or ameliorate inequities for racially-minoritized students in transfer.

In the strictest sense, the Student Equity efforts sought to "ensure that groups historically under-represented in higher education have an equal opportunity for access, success, and transfer" (CCCCO, 2017). Equity planning allows individual community colleges to define what equity is on their campus, to identify specific student groups to support, and take different approaches to mitigate inequity that is appropriate for the context of the institution. With a bottom-up approach to the reform (Ching et al., 2018), there is a myriad of ways to interpret and implement the equity planning program, which ultimately impacts the way student equity is used to address inequities in educational outcomes. As research-practitioners, we share our narratives as a means to shed light on the various ways the Student Equity efforts have been used to improve outcomes for students, generally, and more specifically for Latinx students in community college.

Methods

We draw on counter-narratives to provide lessons learned on the implementation and impact of Student Equity efforts in California community colleges. Counter-narratives, as a methodological strategy, allow individuals to share their voices, experiences, and expertise as "valid, legitimate, and intellectual" contributions toward academic and social discourse (Rodríguez & Greer, 2017, p. 109). The "voices" in this study are those of the two authors. This strategy is rooted in critical research approaches that examine historically oppressed communities in educational systems, such as Latinx students in community colleges (Gaxiola Serrano, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). First-person narratives use stories that privilege the voices of those on the margins of society while at the same time providing the opportunity to reflect, critique, analyze, and build a new reality (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). Through this approach, we provide our experiences as research-practitioners studying and implementing Student Equity efforts to improve the success rates for racially-minoritized students. Additionally, counter-narratives have a rich history in education and the policy context, having been used to examine the experiences of men of color in doctoral programs (Rodríguez & Greer, 2017), Latino transfer student experiences (Gaxiola Serrano, 2017), and faculty of color seeking tenure (Liera & Villarreal, 2017). Taking this approach allowed us to be reflexive, center practitioner experiences, and reframe the type of knowledge that is valued when studying policy reform and its implementation.

Over a ten-month period, we explored our experiences with Student Equity efforts, first as an opportunity to better understand their role in policy implementation then identify different approaches to implement the policy across the state (i.e., greater Los Angeles and Central Valley area). In an attempt to learn more about how the Student Equity Policy was being implemented, we realized there was a lack of literature – academic and pragmatic – to support practitioners wrestling with (a) the planning and implementation process, (b) how to best use equity funds, and (c) garnering buy-in from campus stakeholders. Over the course of our exchanges, we realized the need to document and share our practitioner experiences and research findings related to student equity. To standardize our counter-narratives, we used structured prompts to first reflect on our experiences and then to

systematically record and compare our stories related to Student Equity efforts. We used peer debriefing and comparative reflections to develop the themes for this study (Rodríguez & Greer, 2017). This included coding our writings from the structured prompts to identify salient themes and areas to report out. Triangulation in research is usually thought of as including multiple sources of data to improve the "internal validity" of a study, helping to develop a well thought out conclusion (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 75). We sought to develop triangulation between multiple researchers, a practitioner within the community college providing a ground-level perspective and policy researcher examining the reform across California with a state-level perspective. Triangulation in this sense was about a "dialectal process whose goal seeks a more in-depth and nuanced understanding" of how the implementation of student equity has unfolded in community college (Mertens & Hesse-Biber, 2012, p. 75). Ray was able to bring in the day-to-day experiences of working to implement student equity to address and benefit Latinx students, while Eric has conducted institutional and state level analysis to answer the questions related to how equity policies can be seized to improve the conditions and outcomes for Latinx students. This methodological approach brings a unique perspective where practitioner experiences and research insights are valued, entangled, and combined to offer ways that reform efforts can be used to genuinely and intentionally target the barriers Latinx students face in community college.

In 2007, Bensimon wrote about the "underestimated significance of practitioner knowledge in student success" and the "knowledge, experience, beliefs, and agency" individuals bring to campus (p. 441). It was a call to focus on the central role of practitioners in addressing inequity in higher education. In a similar vein, we see the need for practitioner-oriented knowledge to be at the forefront of policy reform and its implementation on campus. Campus leaders like Ray are the first to receive, interpret, respond, and act on policy efforts from the state seeking to improve student success in community college. Before moving into the findings, it is essential to share contextual information about ourselves allowing us to reflect on how we became involved with the Student Equity efforts.

Ray's background

Working in community college is my call to action, and since then, I have dedicated my life work to helping marginalized students in postsecondary education, particularly Latinx students. My dedication is informed both by my lived experience and understanding of community colleges serving as the primary pathway to postsecondary education opportunities for students of color. Since 2012, I have taught Chicano-Latino Studies courses as a part-time instructor at Zapata Community College (Pseudonym) and have served as the college's Student Equity Coordinator since 2015. As the Student Equity Coordinator, one of my primary responsibilities is to work with the ZCC Student Equity and Success Committee and constituency groups to monitor the Student Equity efforts so that improved outcomes are achieved. Zapata Community College serves over 30,000 students, nearly 60% are Latinx. While Latinx students constitute the largest share of the student population, Latinx students continue to be disproportionately impacted in course completion, basic skills course completion, and transfer. To redress these disparities, ZCC has engaged in several college-wide activities designed to increase success and completion for Latinx students. Some examples include embedding equity in integrated planning, professional development and capacity building, equity-minded and culturally responsive and relevant activities and resources in the Guided Pathway model, partnerships with key equity-oriented organizations. This context provides the opportunity to learn how a campus with a predominant Latinx population uses the Student Equity Policy to address and mitigate equity gaps in explicit ways.

Eric's background

As a researcher at a center focused on addressing racial inequity in higher education, I quickly realized that if I wanted to serve my community, Latinx students, I would need to dedicate myself to studying

where they are. Given the stratification of higher education, over 75% of Latinx students begin their journey in community college (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2018). The SEP and its implementation across the state provided the opportunity to study how community colleges attempt to improve student equity through planning and new categorical funding. In particular, these equity plans have been a gold mine of data, giving me the ability to examine and understand the implementation process across campuses in California. I see this policy as extending possibility for institutions and practitioners to have conversations about inequity and racial disparities that lead to thoughtful and intentional changes in practice and programs that improve outcomes in community college. Related to Student Equity efforts in community colleges, I have helped draft legislative testimony on the policy (Felix et al., 2015), coauthored a study examining how the policy was used to target and address inequities experienced by Latinx students in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (Felix et al., 2018), and explored how the equity planning process was used to mitigate inequities for Black and Latinx students in the largest district in the state (Felix & Fernandez Castro, 2018).

In the subsequent section, we present our narratives along three themes exploring: (a) the Student Equity Policy as necessary but not sufficient, (b) how we envision what can be proposed and achieved to address inequity, and (c) the foundation and conditions necessary to create more equitable community colleges. We recognize that Latinx students and their communities are not a monolith; what works for Latinx students in one region may not be best for another, but acknowledge that being culturally relevant is also about understanding the geographies, histories, and situated contexts across the state and nation for our community. In describing our findings, we hope to share both shortcomings and success in using Student Equity efforts to identify, address, and improve Latinx student success.

Findings

The goal of this study was to share our experiences and highlight the realities and possibilities of embedding equity in community college to increase Latinx student success. The findings reported draw directly from our involvement as a practitioner coordinating student equity efforts on a single campus and a researcher conducting state- and institutional-level analysis of the policy. In what follows, we detail three recurring themes that emerged from the comparison of our interactions and reflections with the student equity program.

Equity policy: necessary, but not sufficient to address latinx inequity

Our first theme explores aspects of the Student Equity efforts that were necessary, but not sufficient to embedd equity in community colleges in support of Latinx student success. This was especially evident for campuses that were just learning what equity was as a general concept, rather than applying equity as a focal point in planning efforts. Thus, our interest in this outcome was twofold. First, we sought to understand how notions of equity (i.e., equity as equality, equity as fairness, equity as transformation) translated from the State Capital to individual campuses, and second, whether the policy's legislative mandates would lead to addressing disparities in student outcomes. One of the primary questions we asked ourselves was, *can equity be legislated?* In answering that question, we found three areas that fell short in providing sufficient support and guidance: (1) defining equity, (2) calculating student inequity, and (3) following the plan template.

Defining equity

One of the major issues is the concept of equity itself. The policy failed to define "equity" appropriately. In fact, there were multiple definitions of equity across the legislative mandate, the Chancellor's Office guidelines, and the planning template itself; thereby leaving the term *equity* up for interpretation to those implementing the policy. Dowd and Bensimon (2015) share that higher education practitioners understand and enact equity along a continuum – from conflating equity with

equality to equity seen as fairness, caring, or transformation. How individuals at an institution define equity influences the approach to their plan development, the type of activities that are proposed, and the ways they envision what the policy can ultimately do to change/improve the campus.

Given our involvement with this effort, we have seen and heard various descriptions and definitions of equity. One of the shortcomings we discovered was the multiple definitions of equity provided in legislative documents. For example, within the California Education Code, equity pertained to fostering "environments in which each person . . . has a reasonable chance to develop his or her potential." The Chancellor's Office's guidelines, which repeat the first definition, adds that equity is about "ensur[ing] that groups historically underrepresented in higher education have an equal opportunity for access, success, and transfer." In SB 860, which provided the SEP with funding, the budget bill trailer shared that the purpose of equity was "to ensure equal educational opportunities and to promote student success for all students, regardless of race, gender, age, disability, or economic circumstances." Although these definitions vary in conceptualizing equity, they prioritize the importance of supporting all students, while also directing some attention to the generic term, "historically underrepresented students," but none necessarily indicate the need to support racially-minoritized students explicitly. In addition to these three documented descriptions are the various conceptions held by practitioners rooted in their lived experience, educational background, and training (Ching et al., 2018). Even though Latinx students comprised 44% of enrollment, 1.1 of the 2.4 million students, and face the lowest rates of transfer success, there was never any language or prompting by state-level actors (i.e., CA Legislature or Chancellor's Office) to use the reform in ways that address this specific group's needs. A drawback to having such flexibility in defining equity or who can be served is the potential for hesitancy among colleges to change campus practices that maintain the status quo and allow for racial disparities to persist (Harris et al., 2015).

While the Chancellor's Office does not have an official definition of equity, colleges can create their own. This is exemplified by Zapata Community College's (ZCC) recent creation and adoption of official definitions for equity, diversity, and inclusion. In spring 2017, the ZCC Strategic Planning Council and Student Equity Committee teamed up to form a joint task force to draft definitions of student equity, diversity, and inclusion. After the appropriate campus representatives approved the definitions, the terms were included in ZCC's official Definition of Terms web page.[3] Prior to this, the college did not have a common language for equity, diversity, or inclusion. These definitions helped the college foster a shared understanding of what equity is, and equally important, what it is not. In our experience, developing a working definition of equity is a foundational aspect of the planning process, from guiding the calculation of inequity to giving implementers a goal to strive for when creating goals and activities.

Calculating inequity

A key aspect of the Student Equity efforts was using data to identify specific groups on campus facing the largest gaps in success known as disproportionate impact. Evident in our experiences with student equity and the California Legislative Analyst's Office (LAO) implementation progress report (Taylor, 2016), were the significant drawbacks to the approaches available to calculate equity gaps on campus. To help colleges determine their equity gaps, the Chancellor's Office provided three quantitative calculation methodologies to conduct a disproportionate impact study to display where equity gaps existed in (1) access, (2) course completion, (3) basic skills progress, (4) degree and certificate completion, and (5) transfer. To do so, colleges were allowed to select one of the following three disproportionate impact methodologies: (1) Proportionality Index, (2) 80% Rule, or (3) Percentage Point Gap (PPG) (Noldon, 2015). With three options to choose from and no foundation as to which approach better lends itself to Student Equity, many colleges were forced to use a *tin marín de dos pingüé*

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[3]See link for details: https://www.fresnocitycollege.edu/faculty-and-staff/resource-guide/student-equity.html

(eeny meeny miny moe) approach to selecting their research methodology. To add, Latinx students are only one of over 16 student groups defined by the state legislature that can be identified and targeted to address the inequity found on campus. In our work, we have observed how both the method and broad target groups included in the calculation limit the ability of campus practitioners to focus on a specific group who might require more attention and resources such as Latinx students. Rather, we see how Student Equity has been used to develop strategies that attempt to target and support over 8 student groups, resulting in diluted efforts to explicitly support Latinx students (Felix & Fernandez, 2018)

Calculating inequity was necessary but not sufficient. A critical step after inputting the data into one of the three methodologies to identify gaps was having the capacity to interpret the results. We learned the importance of asking additional questions about the data in front of us and developing plausible interpretations for the inequities identified. As the LAO reported, many colleges took "the results at face value" and developed strategies for student groups that may not have needed support from the student equity program (Taylor, 2016). Additionally, in our experience calculating inequities, we have found the PPG[4] methodology to be a more pragmatic approach to campus-based research, which then better lends itself to equity-minded goal setting.

Following the plan template

Recent studies examining and interrogating the student equity plans across the state have explored how institutions constructed the meaning of equity and if what was espoused as equity was enacted in the document (Ching & Felix, 2015). Other studies have examined how the plans target and support men of color (F. Harris et al., 2017), Black and Latinx student inequity (Felix & Fernandez, 2018), and Latinx basic skills and transfer issues (Felix et al., 2018). From these studies, we see the multiple ways in which California community colleges have constructed, developed, and implemented their student equity plans. Although they follow the same template, they all differ in their approach to improving the conditions and outcomes on campus for students.

While the template serves a central role in facilitating the planning process, it also has some drawbacks and limitations to developing and enacting activities and interventions that mitigate student inequities. The template is a "mediating artifact" of implementation (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012, p. 28); it plays the primary role in facilitating how individuals and institutions conceptualize what an equity plan looks like since it is the document that all implementing actors need to follow to complete the process successfully. Although having a template is helpful in providing working boundaries for an equity plan, the document itself serves as an anchor in compliance, potentially going as far as stifling creativity and innovation. Thus, there should be more flexibility in what a campus envisions as an equity plan and how they are allowed to complete and submit one. With a limited description of equity, wide variation to calculate inequity and limitations of planning guidelines, our first theme explored how the Student Equity efforts were necessary, but not sufficient to improve conditions and outcomes for Latinx students in community college. The subsequent section examines programming aspects of Student Equity and how the proposed strategies and resources allocated attempt to mitigate equity gaps.

Can these activities improve latinx educational equity?

In our second theme, we use our insight and experience to explore the type of activities proposed in equity plans to address Latinx equity issues. In this section, we describe a set of overall strategies that colleges proposed to mitigate the disproportionate impact. We found four types of approaches: (a)

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[4]The PPG methodology compares the percentage of students in a disaggregated subgroup who succeed in an outcome with the percentage of all students who succeed in the same outcome which is profoundly important because disaggregating student success outcomes by student subgroups display which students require the most support and help to reach their educational goal. The other two methods allowed by the Chancellor's Office were the proportionality index and the 80% rule which compared percentages and artificial cut off points to compare inequity.

"Scaling Up," doing more of the same by expanding, modifying, and/or enhancing existing efforts; (b) "Scattershot," undertaking ad hoc, haphazard, or one-time activities; (c) "Strategic," targeting inequities in intentional ways; and – in the rarest of cases – (d) taking an equity-minded approach to developing activities. A recent study by Felix and Fernandez (2018) found that (a) most proposed activities in equity plans had short and vague descriptions, and (b) used umbrella terms such as "diverse groups" or "identified targets" to describe the racially-minoritized students facing inequities, (c) often proposed to scale-up existing strategies, or (d) proposed an intervention that could support all students. These types of activities took an *"equity for all"* approach since the strategies and interventions did not intentionally target students identified with equity gaps, such as Latinx students, but instead served and benefited all students.

Temporary relief and band-aid solutions

Recent research conducted by Eric has sought to answer: what do the activities outlined in the equity plans look like, who do they target, and what are they trying to achieve (Felix, 2020). For the most part, activities have been vaguely described and target multiple groups to the point of not specifically benefitting any. Others have funded existing programs that may perpetuate inequities, while some take a short-term or scattershot approach that provides "temporary relief" for campus-based inequities. A major flaw in the current planning process is that it does not require colleges to conduct a root-cause analysis or employ action-inquiry. Instead, colleges are quick to identify activities to meet equity targets and goals, without an internal critical lens. Consequently, many colleges have allocated Student Equity funding to existing programs such as learning communities and summer bridge. While this is not a criticism, these programs are not poised to achieve institutional-level equity due to the limited number of students served in each cohort and program. We both agree on the over-reliance on programmatic approaches to Student Equity that can be likened to a "Band-Aid solution" in that these programs do not address the real cause of the problem. Thus, examination and inquiry of practices and services are necessary and can assist colleges in advancing student equity.

Contributing factors to temporary relief and Band-Aid solutions also include activities that are scattershot and or equity for all approaches that focus on fixing and remediating students instead of equitizing the institution to be student-ready. Some examples of the previous-mentioned activities include academic support services such as tutoring and supplemental instruction. Although tutoring and supplemental instruction are becoming increasingly useful out-of-classroom strategies to increase student success, our analysis revealed they are limited in redressing persistent Latinx equity gaps at a fundamental level in course completion because they do not focus on equitizing teaching and learning practices, methods, and faculty-student engagement. Faculty-student engagement among Latinx students is particularly significant and an underutilized method to increase success for these students, especially Latino males. Correspondingly, previous research indicates faculty-student engagement is the strongest predictor of Latino male student success (Cejda & Hoover, 2010; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Setting roots, holding the conversations, and moving student equity forward

For colleges to achieve equity, a fundamental shift in the way policymakers and practitioners view and frame issues of in inequity is needed. For instance, we find it alarming when colleagues from across the state talk about the Student Equity program solely as a "grant program" or "regulatory compliance." The problem with this rhetoric and thinking is that it undermines the possibilities of colleges in reaching their full potential to achieve equity for Latinx students and students of color, in general. We found this to be primarily evident in the way colleges allocate their Student Equity funding. In 2016, the California LAO released the Second Progress Report on the Student Success Act of 2012 with a primary focus on how community colleges have used Student Equity, Student Success and Support Program (SSSP) and Basic Skills Initiative funding to increase student success and equity (Taylor, 2016).

One key finding revealed that "progress has been uneven" and "could be improved" (Taylor, 2016, p. 9). Adding to this, Taylor (2016) found that 60% of Student Equity funding went toward direct services to students, and staff salaries and benefits. Although these immediate direct services to students are helpful, we maintain that colleges are inadvertently disadvantaging future community college students once funding is depleted or no longer available. These programmatic strategies necessitate an equity-minded and culturally relevant approach to addressing a multifaceted problem. One method to achieve this is to embed equity in everyday practices and policies both in Academic Affairs and Student Affairs alike. This would not only include administrators and faculty but should certainly include all classified professionals, as they are often the first point of student contact.

Professional development could be used as a catalyst to inform community college practitioners about the effects of inequities and strategies to reduce them. The foundation of this professional development should be rooted in asset-based approaches, cultural humility, and equity-mindedness. Related, given that faculty-student engagement is the strongest significant predictor of Latinx student success and persistence, especially for Latino men, equally significant amounts of resources should be directed toward professional development and training for all full-time and part-time faculty. Understanding that there are certain faculty contractual and or union implications for professional development, community college administrators should work in collaboration and consultation with their faculty academic senates and local unions to ensure there are ample opportunities for faculty professional development and learning, and compensation as appropriate. Collaborating and consulting with faculty academic senates and local unions on equity-minded and Latinx student-centered professional development is a viable option to increase the level and frequency of engagement in these activities while also equitizing instruction, teaching, and faculty-student engagement.

Discussion

The findings we shared reveal some of the complexities of embedding equity on campus to improve Latinx student success. From our experiences with coordinating and evaluating equity efforts in community college, we wanted to provide tangible action items that can be adopted to improve practice but do not require the unique forms of support California is afforded. Accordingly, the following section translates our results into recommendations to restructure existing or create new policies, practices, and programs that can better serve Latinx students and racially-minoritized students. Specifically, we share three discussion points to help practitioners see the full range of possibilities within policy: a) Make data visible, b) Provide professional development, c) Empower practitioners to seize policy opportunities.

Making the data visible: Using qualitative data to support equity efforts

Our experience with the SEP program revealed that the planning and implementation processes could promote racial equity for Latinx students, but there needs to be accompanying data. First, the data needs to be disaggregated based on race/ethnicity across academic indicators. Then clearly show the current and longstanding racialized inequalities faced by students on campus. Solórzano and Ornelas (2002) highlight how clearly demonstrating disparities in education outcomes by race and ethnicity can compel community college leaders to respond in more race-conscious ways. These data points should reveal that inequity is a product of structures and systems rather than individual students or their communities.

To achieve this requires an approach to institutional research from a root-cause analysis perspective, which moves beyond the conventional form of institutional research and planning. For example, disaggregating historic and current student success outcome data (e.g., course completion, degree and certificate, transfer) might reveal patterns and trends in racial disparities that are attributed to poor institutional performance thereby exposing systemic forms of inequity. A root-cause analysis is analogous to double-loop learning. Building on Bauman's (2002) work, Bensimon (2005) posited

"that double-loop learning focuses attention on the root causes of a problem and the changes that need to be made in the attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices of individuals to bring about enduring results" (p. 104). From a student equity planning and implantation perspective, a root-cause analysis of Latinx outcome disparities would focus on fixing institutional policy and practice rather than trying to fix the students. In other words, instead of trying to fix the students, community colleges and practitioners need to fix the institution by eradicating structures and systems such as color-blind, Eurocentric, race-neutral polices, services, practices, curriculum, programs, and hiring processes. A major shortcoming of the student equity plan template is that it only required colleges to conduct a quantitative disproportionate impact study. Community college leaders[5] should create conditions that require the use of qualitative data to supplement quantitative results. Qualitative methods such as focus groups, interviews, action-inquiry, participant observation, and counter-storytelling could be used to give a voice to Latinx students and other racially-minoritized students, and bring their lived experience to the center of campus-based research and equity planning, thus humanizing the data.

Providing professional development to talk about race and act on racial inequity

A clear area to address within the context of policy use in community college is the reluctance to a) discuss issues of race, racism, and racial inequity and b) make decisions/take action that explicitly address these racial inequities. As with the case of Student Equity, even when policies prompt or encourage the discussion of race, implementers still find ways to enact the reform in race-neutral ways that proport an equity for all approach. Moving toward equity not only requires new programs and practices, but also shifting individuals' awareness, beliefs, and knowledge. For practitioners to truly leverage policy opportunities, there needs to be intensive professional development to provide new language to discuss race, racism, equity, and inequity within the community college context. These trainings can equip implementers with theories, frameworks, and approaches that allow them to tackle racism head on (López, 2003). Just as important is developing an awareness of racial disparities and ways to use state initiatives in race-conscious ways, prompting practitioners to be explicit in serving racially minoritized students rather than an "all students" approach (Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002).

Given our experiences, we know that there is the need for institutional actors to wrestle with the concept of equity, come to define it in a meaningful way, and have conversations with colleagues so that the notion of equity-mindedness permeates campus (Bensimon, 2007). Some scholars suggest that when trying to enact policies that require transformative change, actors must be given the time and training to develop the capacity to implement reforms in a robust manner (Bensimon & Dowd, 2012). In this sense, practitioners require the time and space to learn by implementing reform efforts, evaluating result,s and improving future endeavors. With the myriad of responsibilities on campus already, it becomes more difficult to coordinate and manage a program seeking to improve student equity. Thus, we are advocating for community college practitioners to be given the capacity to (re) build the infrastructure necessary to improve outcomes for racially-minoritized students.

In order for SEP programs to be effective, colleges must move beyond compliance and embrace the program as a moral responsibility to increase institutional effectiveness and student equity outcomes. In thinking about embedding equity as an everyday practice, consideration of racialized identities must be a central component. We believe that equity planning requires the ability to focus on race, to engage in courageous discussions about racial disparities, and acknowledge the role that institutions and practices play in perpetuating or disrupting these inequities for Latinx students and other racial groups. As Justice Sotomayor shared, the way to end racial inequity is "to speak openly and candidly on the subject of race," rather than "sit back and wish away, the racial inequality that exists in our society" (Bernstein, 2013, citing *Schuette v, Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action*). Fundamental shifts are not always system-wide changes

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[5]Our reference to community college leaders specifically refers to institutional agents with positional power.

or the restructuring of academic services. Sometimes, for reforms to make a difference, they need to target practitioner beliefs. As we note, building practitioners' competencies around equity-mindedness and race-consciousness shifts *who* we see as successful, *why* they are successful, and *what* our campus needs to do to become a more equitable space for Latinx students and other racially minoritized groups.

Be empowered to seize policy and address Latinx inequities in community college

How do we get practitioners to see the full range of possibilities within a policy? Mattheis (2016) states that policies seeking educational equity are "heavy on prescription" (i.e., how to calculate student equity) within policy text, but "light on process" (i.e., ways to actually mitigate inequity for Latinx students) making implementation and achieving the intent of the reform a challenge (p. 7). As initially mentioned, with substantial support in the form of financial resources, legislation, and the Chancellor's Office, California was uniquely poised to achieve educational equity in opportunities and outcomes for Latinx students enrolled in community college. Even though official policy language states "colleges must review and address the following populations when looking at disproportionate impact: American Indians or Alaskan natives, Asians or Pacific Islanders, Blacks, Hispanics, Whites, men, women, and persons with disabilities" (CA §54,220). It is evident that the policy provides the opportunity to be race-conscious and Latinx specific, but very few, if any, campuses truly used the equity reform in this way. This work highlights the need for institutions and practitioners to be trained, if not empowered, to use policy in race-conscious ways and be able develop and create explicit strategies for the racial equity gaps identified.

Scholars examining educational policy and the ways they fail to address the needs of racially minoritized students have provided various suggestions to address the reluctance to think about, discuss, and act on racial inequity (Bell, 2004; Bensimon, 2007; Harper, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2004). To leverage policies in race conscious ways, there needs to be intentional identification of reform leaders, assessment of campuses' readiness for equity-oriented change, and in-depth knowledge of policy being implemented (Mavrogordato & White, 2019). The equity-minded leaders then need to mobilize campus stakeholders to support a more transformative vision for the policy implementation and see that the reform can be used to address longstanding inequities, such as the ones facing Latinx students in community college. This may also mean that we need new types of leaders overseeing policy implementation; sometimes frameworks and professional development are not enough. We need Latinx leaders, who reflect the students in community college, overseeing these policies, especially in the context of California where over 45% of students (1.2 million) in the system are Latinx. As Ladson-Billings (2004) shares, we need diverse and critical perspectives from voices we have not heard from before that can envision a new future; one where racial disparity is eradicated (p. 11). Policy, in itself, is not a solution, but offers an opportunity to envision new interventions, some that may not even exist yet, if the leaders overseeing the initiative can see those possibilities and act on them. Without these tools, the possibilities of using reform in race-conscious ways to support Latinx students and other marginalized groups are limited.

Conclusion

Our experiences revealed that equity in educational outcomes for Latinx students could be achieved if colleges are willing to move beyond compliance and work to embed equity into the fabric of the institution. As individuals motivated to improve the conditions for Latinx students in particular and all racially-minoritized students in general, we must also reflect on how our beliefs and practices may contribute to student inequity in community college. Moving beyond compliance means that practitioners should self-internalize the concept of equity-mindedness and ask the following questions: Are we using the same language and concepts when we talk about student equity? How do we, as a college,

define student equity? How can we use the SEP policy and funding as a catalyst for change? Do our current strategies, practices, and services help or hinder students' educational and aspirational goals? If so, how can we improve? Although these guiding questions are not exhaustive, they can assist practitioners and institutions to move beyond compliance and toward transformative equitable change.

Embedding equity requires community colleges to sew the concept of equity-mindedness (Bensimon, 2007) into the cultural fabric of the institution (i.e., mission, vision, language, program review, hiring practices, and on-boarding processes). Equity-mindedness is not about remediating racially-minoritized students who are perceived as deficient, but about respecting their aspirations and struggles and changing existing policies, practices, and structures that are found to underserve them. With equity-mindedness, data showing the low achievement of racially-minoritized students is seen less as an issue of their poor preparation, motivation, and engagement, and more as a matter of how race, class, ideology, history, and power structure perpetuate inequality in the United States. Equity-mindedness thus requires an awareness of how policies, cultural norms, and practices that appear race-neutral may, in fact, disadvantage Latinx students and reproduce racial hierarchies in higher education. As institutions move toward more equitable outcomes there is a need to recognize that racial equity may demand the unequal treatment of students and redistribution of resources, equity-minded practitioners must be willing to invest more resources, time, and effort on Latinx students relative to other student groups. The eradication of educational inequity facing Latinx students can only be addressed when racial inequality is acknowledged and addressed by practitioners through explicit and targeted policies, practices, and programs that are race-conscious.

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ORCID

Eric R. Felix ⓘD http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6116-0214

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