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Liberatory Community Leadership a Race Conscious Mindset to Implementing Guided Pathways for Adult Learners of Color

Dr. Edward Bush

Consumnes River College

In the wake of multiple pandemics (including COVID-19 and racial injustice), community college leaders have increasingly sought to be forward leaning on issues of equity, reflecting a significant step forward in advancing social justice. However, prominent and frequently used frames and approaches, like anti-racist frameworks, may ultimately fall short of producing the type of leadership necessary for producing deep systemic change, including the substantive changes necessary to create equitable pathways for adult students of color. I assert that efforts should instead focus on dismantling, decolonizing, and reconstructing systems that are rooted in institutional racism and White supremacy. I argue that the goal of educational leaders is to become a liberator that challenges institutional practices and works to break the Eurocentric cultural hegemony that dominates the ontology of our institutions.

The notion of decolonization and liberation is both distinct from previous approaches and simultaneously represents an evolution of the current equity and anti-racist approaches that many of our colleges are adopting. When one examines the educational outcomes of students, it is apparent that students of color are not achieving at the same proportional rate as their White and

Asian counterparts. Even as more community colleges expand their guided pathways work, which is often leading to improvement in student outcomes across racial groups, prevailing gaps in student outcomes continues to persist. In February 2021, the Campaign for College Opportunity released its annual report titled The State of Higher Education for Black California. The report showed that completion rates for Black students at California Community Colleges are the lowest rates of any race/ethnic group and have continued to decline. As Black completion rates decline, the equity gap between Black students and their White peers grew, from 16 percentage points in 2011 to 17 percentage points in 2017. Like Kendi (2009), I assert that this underachievement is a result of systemic racism rather than an indictment of a student's ability. However, liberatory or Pro-Black, Indigenous, Latinx education differs from an anti-racist approach in that it asserts that the goal of racial equity is not the achievement of a particular educational outcome, but rather students of color ability to maintain, learn, and value their own cultural identity in order to build self-sustaining and sovereign communities.

For example, White students are more successful because their experiences, culture, values, history, and traditions are centered at our colleges and

Whiteness is its default position. Thus, to improve outcomes for students of color, college leaders have to re-center the educational experience. In order to do this, educational leaders have to first fundamentally understand and commit to the notion that the colleges we lead and serve are racist institutions; they are racist because they continuously produce inequitable outcomes for students of color and, most importantly, because the practices of colleges reaffirm and perpetuate ideas of White superiority and Black inferiority. Towards this end, leaders that are working to implement and expand guided pathways must understand that this work does not exist outside the racist frame that is imbedded in their institution. Educational leaders often struggle to see this for many reasons, but one key area of weakness that exists is the dangerous fallacy that our colleges actively practice race-neutral practices. I opine that every decision and every action has racial implications and ask for readers to simply think about practices that are often left out of the student equity conversation, as these are often viewed as standard ways in which a college operates. For example, consider how college leaders approach the construction and architecture of college facilities. As college presidents and administrators, we have been through the creation and implementation of many facilities' master plans for our institutions. We have yet to hear an architect reference any architectural design that is not European inspired. Roman, Greek, modern European, old European, and gothic are frequently referenced but never Mayan, Aztec, eastern, Moorish, or west or east African. To illustrate the significance of this, imagine if college leaders made the decision to design its math building to look like a Mayan temple, which would be appropriate given the Mayan civilization's mastery of mathematical concepts. How would that change the psyche of Native American and Latinx students enrolling in math? My sense is that it would be difficult for Latinx students of indigenous descent to believe that they cannot excel in mathematics when they understand that mathematics is embedded in their cultural tradition. There are other "race-neutral" practices; such as college rituals and traditions of commencement ceremonies and convocation that

educational leaders continue without question and disruption. These ceremonies directly pull from European (notably Roman and Greek) cultural practices and traditions so much so that at many colleges, students have created culturally specific graduations, because the European default graduation simply does not speak to their own traditions. To add further insult, these culturally specific graduations have been openly criticized as not being inclusive and have been frowned upon as being 'counterculture' because they have challenged a tradition that clearly was not working for students of color. These are just a couple of examples of how a college's practices can affirm, and reaffirm, Whiteness and thereby relegate the experiences non-Europeans to being the "other" or, worse, not even considered at all. I encourage leaders to ask: What messages do such actions send to students of color? How do these actions perpetuate students' sense of worth, value, and identity? How do these actions reinforce the idea of being outsiders in the academic space?

It is imperative to have a deep interrogation of current practices to truly chart a path different than what traditional colonial and western leadership theories have demonstrated. Below are practical recommendations institutions and leaders can begin to engage in to start charting the necessary path to a more positive paradigm shift to better student outcomes and create a more race conscious approach to guided pathways for adult learners:

1. Make a list of the last five decisions that you made and ask the following questions: Who benefited from this decision? Who was harmed by this decision? What information did I use to arrive at this decision? What cultural value did I draw from in making this decision? Were there any unintended consequences as a result of the decision, and who was impacted by it? By asking such thoughtful and reflective questions, you are not only opening yourself up to be vulnerable in your leadership, but you are exemplifying authentic leadership by potentially understanding there may be a segment of your campus community that may

be harmed by your unintended consequence. This level of vulnerability and honesty is instrumental in decolonizing yourself and decentering Whiteness.

2. Read about the pre-colonial and pre-enslavement history of students of color. Elevating your consciousness and knowledge is foundational to populations you lead, and it is aligned with being a lifelong educator, seeking knowledge from the cradle to the grave. Often the burden of education about these issues falls upon those who are not centered in history, and it should not be the burden of the oppressed who have been erased intentionally from the history books to educate the oppressors.

3. Conduct an audit of all institutional practices and policies that produce disparate outcomes for students of color, and cease all practices that cause harm to faculty, staff administrators, and students of color. This examination will reveal colonial and oppressive practices that subjugate themselves to further burden students. An example of a practice that may require examination is your institution's disqualification and probation process. Specifically, decriminalizing the language used to describe these events may be necessary, and this may include rebranding it to a second chance or redemption workshop. Another example may require leaders to incentivize socio-economically disadvantaged students who may work multiple jobs and, as such, frequently drop or withdraw courses with the opportunity to register first so they can plan accordingly instead of being penalized with a hold on their record. This asset-based approach may augment some of your punitive colonial practices and shed a more empathic restorative justice approach an indigenous empathic practice. Students should not be penalized for having to choose to feed their families versus coming to class. By being able to participate in early registration it will provide them with the best schedule and best professors.

4. Publicly acknowledge your own complicity in perpetuating racist institutional practices and decolonize college practices by re-centering

college norms around the cultural experience and lived experiences of students of color. This acknowledgement itself is an indication of where you are as an institution and how much work that awaits you. It is also a vindication for those who may have experienced some harm.

5. Hire racial equity experts to provide professional development to you and other college staff with the intent to build expertise and capacity. Executive leaders should consider hiring an equity leadership coach to provide ongoing support in efforts of intentionally incorporating BIPOC voices in the college formal recommending bodies (e.g., academic senate, participatory governance, college councils, etc.).

6. Construct a diverse council of advisors. Create an advisory committee of community members that include elders from indigenous tribes, faith leaders, business investors, coaches, parents, and alumni that reflect your campus population. Also, include student affinity groups, such as the Black Student Union, MECHA, AAPI, amongst others. This will help you make wise decisions in line with your community but also acknowledge your commitment to the non-colonial structures of input and leadership needed.

The aforementioned recommendations are steps in the right direction in chartering an audacious and bold path towards educational liberation and freedom that would lead to true equitable outcomes for adult learners of color. I hope that this liberatory leadership framework empowers you to begin the process of dismantling and decolonizing antiquated ways of oppression and ensuring we leave a legacy of excellence where education can finally serve as the ultimate equalizer.

Dr. Bush can be reached at
edward.bush.phd@gmail.com

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Proactive Career and Employability Advising for Undocumented and DACA Community College Students

Susana M. Muñoz, Ed.D.

Associate Professor

Colorado State University- Fort Collins

As a scholar-activist working with and for Latinx undocumented and DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) students for the last 15 years, my research team and I noticed some student trends within our Colorado community college focus group data. First, most students we interact with are undocumented but DACA-eligible, and two, most students are adult students working full-time while supporting their families. It is important to note that DACA is a work permit that can be renewed every two years and is extended only to those who were under 31 years before 2012, have continually resided in the U.S. since 2007, have completed high school or be a veteran, and entered the U.S. before the age of sixteen. In contrast, undocumented students in community college are working towards their credentials can work in certain industries but require extensive training on how to obtain work authorization. This topic came up in our research when the conversations turned to the future of DACA and how their community college was providing support to discuss employment options and strategies, one student (Amy) paused, tilted her head to the side, and responded, “what do you mean by career support?” I clarified and asked whether their advisors provided programming or workshops specifically for

DACA and undocumented students regarding applying for jobs as DACA recipients or how they would potentially navigate the freelance, gig, or entrepreneurship options as undocumented students. Surprised by my statement, Amy replied, “No, that’s probably something I should ask my advisor about, and I’m sure if I ask, they will find the resources for me.” Another participant said, “I had no idea that I could ask about job or employability support, but I have confidence that my advisor would know the answers” After the focus group was over, I sat and pondered how their request would be received. Are advisors at this one community college knowledgeable about employability pathways for undocumented and DACA students?

Nationally, approximately 427,000 undocumented students are enrolled in higher education. Undocumented immigrant communities also impact our U.S. economy by contributing approximately \$18.9 billion to federal taxes and 11.7 billion to state and local taxes. Scholars (Jauregui, et al, 2008; Negrón-Gonzales, 2017; Ngo & Hinojosa, 2021; Nienhusser, 2014; Muñoz, et al, 2018; Salinas, et al, 2019; Terriquez, et al, 2015; Valenzuela, et al, 2015) of undocumented and DACA community college students often attribute college success to flexible courses and



scheduling, the online presence of resources, mental health support, and opportunities and access to financial aid resources as well as information about apprenticeships and internships. However, in my experience, some community colleges lack institutional directives from system leadership, and there is a lack of understanding of how the socio-political contexts impact the sense of belonging for undocumented and DACA college students, especially adult students. What is also troubling is the lack of accountability for support staff, advisors, counselors, and faculty to attend training devoted to understanding and supporting the experiences of undocumented and DACA students. In our individual interviews of community college faculty and staff who were considered “equity champions,” we found that many were committed to diversity, equity, and inclusion on their campus but have not sought opportunities to discuss undocumented and

DACA students specifically. Community colleges cannot ethically recruit and retain undocumented and DACA students without understanding how their state contexts affect employability and job attainment. So where does one start?

Each community college should convene a task force on DACA and undocumented students to increase visibility and awareness of issues faced by these students. This campus working group can then identify stakeholders, legal counsel, and potential workforce industries to develop partnerships for potential internships and fellowships. Further, it’s imperative to understand that employability pathways may differ for undocumented students since they do not have work authorization . Immigrant Rising continues to be a national leader in helping undocumented and DACA students learn how to be gainfully employed and use their college credentials through trainings and webinars. Most recently,

the Education Trust released a comprehensive report about undocumented and DACA students in higher education and, among many of their insightful recommendations, exploring alternatives to employment for undocumented students who do not have work authorization was recommended. They state, “Higher education institutions can create or expand fellowships and entrepreneurship programming for these students and promote or support worker cooperative businesses led by undocumented students and graduates.” Amy and the many students we had the honor of interacting with within our focus groups have dedicated their time, talent, and resources to achieving their educational goals. Community college leaders can proactively strategize ways to empower and inform undocumented and DACA students of their employability pathways. The REACH (Racial Equity for Adult Credentials in Higher Education) Collaborative at the University of Illinois is an excellent resource that can provide strategies rooted in equity consciousness in order to assist adult undocumented and DACA learners. I also call upon our elected officials and higher education leaders to advocate for a pathway toward citizenship to ensure that Amy and her fellow classmates can be part of the talented workforce to secure the future success of our U.S. economy.



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