Supporting Men of Color in Community College through California's Student Equity Policy

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A major effort being implemented in the California Community College System is the Student Equity Policy (SEP). 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 for disproportionately impacted students. 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 race and gender are two focal areas of the reform, the Student Equity Policy offers the opportunity to explicitly address men of color (MOC).

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. 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 COLLEGE

The state of California has the largest community college system in the nation, with 116 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 (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).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Policy Analysis (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. This approach allowed us to examine the student equity policy through a race-conscious critical lens.

METHODS

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.

RESULTS

Addressing inequity: Identification and action

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. 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.

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 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).

Promising practices, few and far between

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 were both Black and Latinx men with 13 references. For Latinx men, there were nine activities that primarily focused on them.

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 than 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.

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.

The search for promising practices
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.

Degree completion
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.

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.

RECOMMENDATIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND SIGNIFICANCE
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. The equity planning process allows for institutions to identify areas where student groups are facing gaps in success. 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
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. 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). 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.

Countering deficit notions of men of color in community college
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.

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. 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.

AUTHOR BIOS
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