

USC Race and
Equity Center

**HOW CAN WE
ENSURE THAT
GUIDED PATHWAYS
AND RACIAL EQUITY
EFFORTS ARE
SEAMLESSLY
INTEGRATED?**

Lesley Bonds

***Moving from Racelessness
to Race-Conscious
Approaches***

July 2022

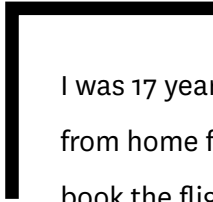

BIOGRAPHY



Lesley Bonds (she/her)

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Born and raised in Oildale, California, Lesley Bonds is a First Generation high school and college graduate. In her current role, Bonds supports college leaders across the greater Los Angeles region in driving transformative change using the guided pathways framework. Prior to this role, she spent nearly six years at a large, Central Valley community college as the Director of Student Success & Equity where she was responsible advancing student equity and completion across the college. Her key assignments included leadership of Guided Pathways, the College Promise and transfer pathway, the Student Equity & Achievement Program, grant writing and resource development, and leadership of accreditation activities. She earned her bachelor's degree from the University of North Carolina Wilmington and her master's in College Student Affairs Administration from the University of Georgia. Connect with her on Twitter at [@Lesley_Bonds](#) where she tweets about community college reform, racial justice, intersectional feminism, and occasionally posts photos of her three pups and hundreds of plants.



I was 17 years old when I took my first flight, traveling nearly 3,000 miles from home for college. I used some cash scholarship money I had earned to book the flight. Stepping off the plane in North Carolina was disorienting, overwhelming, and exhilarating all at once. In mid-August, the humidity was foreign and brutal. Arriving by cab at my dorm room, I pulled my bags up three flights of stairs to meet nine other roommates and their families. My roommate was cheerful, her side of the room colorfully decorated. A poster of The Beatles adorned the wall above her neatly made bed. Instant friends, I knew.

Yet after our initial greetings, my cheeks flushed as I realized the college did not provide sheets, a comforter, or pillows. I had not packed those things and I did not have any money left to purchase them. You see, I did not have a bank account and neither did my family. My mother had only recently secured a job where she would go on to earn \$18,000 annually, her attempt to mitigate the damage of my father's addiction to crack and heroin. He had recently fallen homeless, sleeping in cars or in the drug-ridden hotels that lined the infamous Buck Owens Boulevard in Bakersfield, California. I used a couple of balled-up sweatshirts as a pillow for the next few weeks until I earned my first work-study paycheck.

The next few years were grueling. As a first-generation high school graduate and out-of-state student with an Expected Family Contribution of zero, I had naively assumed my "full financial aid package" would cover my needs. Of course, it did not. I worked four jobs, 50+ hours per week, and took 5-6 classes each term. I hustled to graduate a semester early to save money and I made it out with a decent GPA. I went on to pursue a graduate program in College Student Affairs Administration where, with a bit of time, information, and perspective, I came to realize I succeeded despite my college, not because of it. And more than that, I realized personally and professionally that my college experience as a white woman was vastly different from that of my peers of color.



Despite the challenges I navigated, I was rewarded throughout my journey for the same things for which my peers of color would have been vilified. People perceived my lack of patience, worn thin from nutritional and sleep deprivation, as assertiveness. This led my professors to encourage me to pursue a minor in Leadership Studies (I did) while my supervisors promoted me to management roles where I could earn more per hour and gain critical skills I would need later. I now understand my acceptance into graduate school and placement into a tuition-waiving assistantship were the direct result of my perceived leadership experience, and my expedited career trajectory and relative financial security (despite my six-figure student loan debt) can largely be attributed to the ways in which whiteness permeated my institution. Yes, I succeeded despite my college, but not without the protections of my own whiteness.

I share a piece of my story because it has fundamentally shaped my thinking about what it means to “other” students and the approaches we must take to reform our community colleges to center the needs of the marginalized. I have spent the past decade working in both Guided Pathways (GP) and student equity spaces – most of that time as an administrator at a California community college. Through this work, I have come to believe in the power of the GP framework to advance equitable outcomes by demystifying the higher education maze, simplifying program requirements, and de-siloing resources and supports to make them more accessible and effective. Yet, I have also witnessed a sort of appropriation of the framework - a dilution of the intent and a distracted focus on what I call “the stuff” vs. “the work.”

GUIDED PATHWAYS LEVEL-SETTING

In her 2020 book, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents*, Isabel Wilkerson likens America to an old house. An excerpt reads: “We in the developed world are like homeowners who inherited a house on a piece of land that is beautiful on the outside, but whose soil is unstable loam and rock... We did not erect the uneven pillars or joists, but they are ours to deal with now. And any further deterioration is, in fact, on our hands.” Often, well-intentioned college leaders fail to recognize that inequities in our colleges have been created and perpetuated by design. While we did not build these institutions, inheriting our colleges comes with the responsibility to disrupt “any further deterioration,” as Wilkerson says, through a critical, honest interrogation of how we got here.

While there are myriad interpretations of the GP framework, here is mine: the framework has never been about following a checklist. It creates an opportunity for us to respond meaningfully to the imperative we have as caretakers of our institutions, students, and communities. It calls us to look inward, to ask ourselves extraordinarily difficult and necessary questions to confront the uncomfortable truths about our institutions. GP is less about a few best practices and more an awakening of who we are, what we value, and how we enact our commitment to those values. At a high-level, this requires a shift in how we discuss the work we must pursue in alignment with the GP framework. For instance:

FROM THIS

What can we do to make our pathways clearer and more accessible?



TO THIS

Who, specifically, have we marginalized by creating a maze of program requirements? How do we counter the negative effects this has had on our students, their families, and their communities?

How can we improve our orientation programs?



How do we communicate the value of our programs to the individuals, families, and communities we aim to serve? How do these programs advance racial, social, and economic justice?

How do we get students to re-enroll in the next term?



What about our college’s policies, practices, and cultures create barriers to student progression and completion? For whom?

How do we assess student learning?



How can we honor cultural wealth¹ to create opportunities for students to make meaning and demonstrate their learning?

TRANSFORMING TOWARD A RACIAL EQUITY APPROACH BEGINS WITH YOU

Applying a racial equity lens to the guided pathways framework requires us to center the strengths and needs of students of color in our redesign efforts. Without doing so, we risk defaulting to whiteness as the norm, perpetuating the inequities we aim to address. In other words, “race-neutral” policies are never actually race-neutral; they are informed by and cater to white students’ strengths and needs, often pushing the strengths and needs of students of color further to the margins. Only through unlearning of our personal and institutionally conditioned behaviors, beliefs, and biases, as well as constant self-inquiry can we begin to recognize and dismantle racism in ourselves, our community, and the systems we navigate. This is fundamental to our transformation towards more racially just institutions.

**Yesterday I was
clever, so I wanted
to change the
world. Today I am
wise, so I am
changing myself.
-Rumi**

In short, transforming our colleges to achieve racial justice is a deeply personal endeavor that begins with each one of us. Before we move to practical application on campus, here are a few reflection questions to help practitioners move beyond race evasiveness personally and professionally:

- *How have my individual experiences in education informed my beliefs about what our students need?*
- *How would I describe the purpose of higher education? Is that purpose inclusive of the histories, socioeconomic conditions, and current lived realities of communities of color?*
- *Do I believe community colleges play an explicit role in advancing racial, social, and economic justice? If not, why? If so, how? What role do I play as a member of this system in advancing this goal?*

While the answers we surface through this reflection may be sobering, understanding and addressing our own oppressive mindsets is a prerequisite to understanding and addressing oppressive college structures.

¹ Yosso, Tara J. 2005. “Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth.” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8 (1): 69–91.

**INITIATING RACE-CONSCIOUS
GUIDED PATHWAYS INQUIRY TO
ADDRESS STRUCTURAL RACISM**

To engage in anti-racist redesign efforts, a GP workgroup or committee might begin by asking themselves a few questions. While not comprehensive, the table below illustrates prompts that may spark a shift from the traditional, transactional approach to GP toward one that is more transformative and race-conscious.

Advancing Racial Equity via Guided Pathways Inquiry & Design	
Transactional GP Practices	Intentional, Race-Conscious Inquiry and Design Prompts to Transform our Mindsets & Our Structures
<p>Mapping Pathways to Student End Goals: Traditionally includes meta-majors, curricular mapping, clear paths to employment and/or transfer</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have we analyzed the proportion of enrollment among students of color in each meta-major? What does this analysis tell us about what should change? How? • Are we actively recruiting students and communities of color into high-wage pathways? If not, why? What can we do differently? • Are students of color who are more likely to be working, parenting/ caretaking, or taking courses outside of traditional college operating hours able to access and enroll in the courses in their program when noted on their maps and access academic and co-curricular supports equitably?
<p>Helping Students Choose and Enter a Pathway: Traditionally includes outreach and orientation programs, onboarding and early educational planning, dual enrollment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In what ways do (or don't) counselors/ advisors affirm students' racial identities in the educational onboarding process? How can we bolster this through hiring, onboarding, and ongoing professional development? • How have we limited on-ramps to high-demand, high-wage programs? How have our beliefs about traditional measures of student "readiness" like standardized tests impacted enrollment among students of color into high-wage STEM pathways? • Are we conducting outreach, including offering dual enrollment courses, in high schools with large populations of students of color?
<p>Keeping Students on the Path: Traditionally includes early alerts, Student Success Teams, cohort management and software</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have we developed a profile of our average student based on our data? What does this profile tell us about the students we serve? • Have we disaggregated our retention data? What do the data tell us about the barriers students of color navigate? • Have we disaggregated our "probation" data? What does this tell us? • Do we believe colleges have a responsibility to meet students' non-academic needs like housing and food? Why or why not? How might our belief about this affect students, families, and communities of color?
<p>Ensuring Students are Learning: Traditionally includes professional development, clear learning outcomes, experiential and service learning</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do faculty engage in dialogue about course success data, disaggregated by race? • What about our institutional learning environment fails to include impactful elements of programs like Umoja or Puente, such as communal learning spaces, culturally relevant texts, and mentoring? Why? • Do our faculty represent the students we serve? Why or why not? • In what ways do our curricular materials reflect our students? • Have we analyzed how many of the texts used in each department were authored by people of color? Are there faculty willing and able to use a text authored by a person of color? How can we initiate this?

PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF A RACIAL EQUITY LENS TO THE GUIDED PATHWAYS PRACTICES

Once a campus has engaged in a race-conscious guided pathways line of inquiry, they are better positioned to recognize and disrupt racist policies, practices, and cultures at scale. In this section, I offer three examples of GP practices applied in racist, race neutral, and race conscious ways.

Racist Guided Pathways Practices:

Centers whiteness in design, resulting in a direct negative impact on historically marginalized or excluded groups, particularly students of color

Race Neutral/Evasive Guided Pathways Practices:

May recognize difference in outcomes but applies the same treatment or intervention to all students, regardless of race

Race Conscious/Anti-Racist Guided Pathways Practices:

Centers the strengths and needs of historically marginalized or excluded students of color in the design and implementation

The GP framework suggests early educational planning is essential in helping students choose and enter a pathway.

A GP team identified advising sessions as a crucial lever to help students choose and enter a pathway. A GP lead observed a session between a counselor and a Black student. The counselor noticed the student's score on the placement test required several terms of remedial math coursework. As a result, she suggested the student pursue a certificate rather than a transfer degree to avoid the math sequence. "You can always decide to pursue a degree later," she said.

While well-intentioned, the counselor's recommendation deterred the student from his educational goal based on the use of a proven-racist assessment instrument. Even institutions that have discontinued the use of assessment tests still often lean heavily on other questionable measures of academic ability when advising students on educational opportunities and career goals. As a result, these students feel shame, disconnection, question their belonging in higher education, and may pursue lower-wage fields, affecting them, their families, and their communities.

Takeaway: A race-conscious GP line of inquiry reveals an individual bias and a racist institutional placement policy that harms students of color.

The GP framework encourages colleges to clarify pathways via program maps with clearly defined requirements, course sequences, and program outcomes that lead to employment and/or transfer.

After examining disaggregated enrollment data by program, a GP team identified low enrollment among Black and Latinx students in traditionally high-wage STEM and health sciences programs. In reviewing course offerings, they learned key gateway STEM courses and labs are only offered at peak times during the day and are unavailable during winter or summer intersessions, making it impossible for students who cannot take courses during the day to complete a program.

While counselors advised students to enroll in courses along a clear, sequenced map, the institution's enrollment management process did not include the needs of the campus' diverse student body. In other words, the race- and identity-neutral approach to program mapping failed to equitably serve the college's students of color.


Takeaway: A race-conscious GP line of inquiry revealed an institutional practice that unintentionally creates a barrier for low-income and students of color to pursue a clear path to employment or transfer.

The GP framework catalyzed the use of early alerts, often deployed by teams to support and keep students on-path. Many tools raise auto-alerts using predetermined "risk" criteria.

After launching early alerts, a GP team created a task force to monitor the rollout. The team quickly noticed several instances of high-performing students of color visiting their offices in response to an alert, fearing they had done something wrong and were in trouble. In reviewing the auto-alert criteria, the team noticed a significant number of "risk points" were assigned based on demographics, including race, age, and gender. Black men over the age of 24 were much more likely to receive an alert signaling they were off-track, even if their academic performance did not warrant this kind of intervention.

The team suspended auto-alerting until they could reestablish criteria that reflected students' needs while honoring their strengths. They took ownership, communicated the pattern to researchers, faculty, and staff to acknowledge the harm and to correct it. They deployed a new, humanized process: 1) removed auto-deployed messages based on demographic flags, 2) required human involvement in all student alerts, and 3) used asset-based, identity-affirming messages.

Takeaway: A race-conscious GP line of inquiry uncovered an opportunity to disrupt a practice that produced inequitable outcomes for students of color.



RACIAL EQUITY WORK BEGINS WITH YOU, BUT TRANSFORMATION DEMANDS A COALITION

Sustainable change takes time. In my work, I have witnessed this truth take shape in nearly real time. Many colleges that began their reform efforts at a slower pace often took a deliberate approach, opting to methodically identify and address root causes before spinning up new programs or supports. The examples I shared in the previous section are real examples from actual campuses. In the example of an anti-racist practice, the college created spaces to evaluate their practice, make meaning of a pattern they were seeing, paused the intervention when they noted concerns, and took the time to redeploy a new strategy that honored the strengths and met the needs of their students of color. This transformation took time, a coalition of committed campus constituents, and a willingness to adapt.

Cultural change requires a movement, not a moment, and certainly not a mandate. These institutions have built a coalition of change makers through shared engagement in and conviction around the Guided Pathways movement rather than responding to the ambient noise of the mandate's moment. They have focused less on meta-majors and maps and more on iterating existing policies, practices, and culture to create a more accessible, equitable, affirming, and engaging colleges.

GETTING STARTED

A comprehensive approach to centering racial equity in GP work requires intentionality and persistence – a balance of personal work and structural work. Below are five phases GP leaders and practitioners can initiate to help them transform their mindsets and structures to advance racial equity.

1. **Do the self-work:** Take time to reflect on and make meaning of your own journey and how this journey has informed your own mindset and approach to your work.
2. **Accept and embrace responsibility:** Accept ownership and embrace responsibility for the harms our educational system has caused, even though you did not design it.
3. **Move beyond the checklist:** Seek to understand guided pathways not as a list of items to implement but instead as a framework that provides a lens for transformative work.
4. **Engage in race-conscious inquiry:** Interrogate traditional, transactional approaches to GP by layering race-conscious inquiry into every GP redesign effort.
5. **Build a Coalition:** Understand that no individual can do this work alone. Transformative change demands that we work together in community to achieve the outcomes we seek. As a collective of educators, we have the knowledge, experience, skills, and an unrivaled power to build a more racially just world.

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