

USC Race and
Equity Center

HOW CAN WE MOVE AWAY FROM RACELESS POLICIES AND PRACTICES IN CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES?

Adrián Trinidad and
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***Moving from Racelessness
to Race-Conscious
Approaches***

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BIOGRAPHY



Dr. Adrián Trinidad (he | él)

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Adrián Trinidad (he | él) is Assistant Director for Community College Partnerships at the USC Race and Equity Center. A first-generation college student raised by Mexican immigrants, Adrián proudly began college at Los Angeles Trade-Technical College earning an associate degree in liberal arts. At the Race and Equity Center, Adrián supports the California Community Colleges by building racial equity resources through partnerships with system leaders, researchers, funders, and advocacy organizations. This work operates in the nexus between research and practice, with the ultimate goal of advancing more racially just spaces within the community colleges. Before this role, Adrián was a researcher at the Center for Urban Education, where he facilitated professional learning experiences that focused on equity-mindedness within community colleges. His published scholarship has focused on developmental education reforms, policy implementation, and transfer equity. Adrián earned a B.A. in sociology, an M.A. in public policy, and a Ph.D. in Urban Education Policy, all from the University of Southern California.

BIOGRAPHY

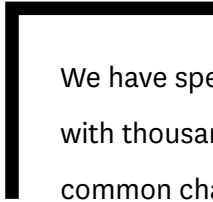



Dr. Shaun Harper
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Shaun Harper is one of the nation's most highly respected racial equity experts. He is a Provost Professor in the Rossier School of Education and the Marshall School of Business at the University of Southern California. He also is the Clifford and Betty Allen Chair in Urban Leadership, founder and executive director of the USC Race and Equity Center, and immediate past president of the American Educational Research Association. He also served as the 2016-17 Association for the Study of Higher Education president, and was elected to the National Academy of Education in 2021.

Dr. Harper's research focuses primarily on race, gender, and other dimensions of equity in an array of organizational contexts, including K-12 schools, colleges and universities, and corporations. He has published 12 books and over 100 other academic publications. His research has been cited in more than 17,000 published studies across a vast array of academic fields and disciplines. Atlantic Philanthropies and the Bill & Melinda Gates, Lumina, Ford, Kellogg, College Futures, Kresge, Sloan, and Open Society Foundations have awarded him more than \$18 million in grants.

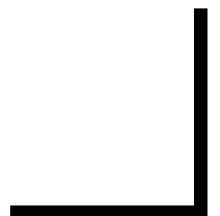


We have spent many hours engaging in professional learning experiences with thousands of community college faculty and institutional leaders. A common challenge is when equity is defined in broad, raceless ways that leave a great deal of ambiguity when enacting equity plans and programs. For example, we have come across colleges using their state allocation of Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) funds for seemingly unrelated purchases, such as iPads for all employees or expensive toaster ovens for academic offices. Can warm bread have an indirect impact on equitable student outcomes? It is entirely possible, yes. However, the point here is colleges that craft vague equity policies left open to interpretation take on the risk of supporting efforts that have a limited, indirect, or immeasurable impact on the success of students of color.

A pervasive challenge in community colleges is the raceless design, execution, and evaluation of programs intended to achieve racially just outcomes. With little mention of race in equity policies, we can minimize the ways race and racism materialize in everyday practices, despite ample evidence that race is the strongest predictor of 1) access to transfer-level courses, 2) completion of gatekeeper transfer courses, 3) participation in honors programs, 4) degree completion, and 5) transfer success outcomes (the list goes on). When policymakers and system leaders craft equity reforms, they neglect to mention race under the misguided assumption that practitioners will have the “will and skill” to incorporate race in their practices without appropriate guidance. Without the “will,” some college administrators and faculty can overlook their role in maintaining race as the strongest predictor of student success in community college. For developmental reforms, such as California’s AB 705 to succeed in closing equity gaps, colleges must support building the “skill” of faculty to adapt their curriculum and integrate culturally relevant pedagogical approaches for students of color who comprise most of our students across the system.



In the midst of a global pandemic and racial reckoning, equity-minded staff and faculty can suffer from burnout without an explicit agenda that allows them to provide targeted support to students of color. Raceless policies perpetuate the myth of the “rising tide lifts all boats” and “equity for all” approaches on campuses that not only fail to close racial equity gaps but often widen the gaps in student success outcomes. Below, we outline common misconceptions that lead colleges to avoid factoring race and racism in the design of programs, policies, and spaces intended for racial equity. Then we discuss steps to avoid these common pitfalls and take a conscious approach to making race central to the planning and design process.



COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT RACE-CONSCIOUSNESS

Misconception # 1: “I cannot talk about race.”

The passage of California Proposition 209 of 1996 – which bans public institutions from using race and ethnicity as a factor in college admissions, hiring, and contracting in public agencies – created a great deal of uncertainty as to how to consider race within education. Whether Prop 209 imposes limits beyond admissions and hiring is widely misunderstood. For instance, Prop 209 does not prohibit local colleges and districts from creating programmatic race-conscious and culturally relevant efforts to serve their student populations (Felix & Trinidad, 2020). The law does not prohibit us from talking about race with our colleagues or facilitating dialogues about the state of racial equity on our campuses. It does not preclude us from sharing data disaggregated by race and ethnicity with college employees. Prop 209 did not preclude the state from providing community colleges with hundreds of millions of dollars in funding through the Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) Program to eliminate inequitable student outcomes that are primarily stratified by race and ethnicity.

Misconception # 2: “Race talk divides us.”

Current debates on the teaching of concepts such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) or gender identity lessons in public schools underscore how fraught some topics are for educators. Many tend to avoid conflict or engage in these “uncomfortable” conversations over concerns about collegiality. People avoid these topics because they fear others will see them as stirring controversy or being ignorant or misinformed. As a society, we also generally lack a sense of awareness over how marginalized people continue to be systematically discriminated against and excluded from higher education in the present day. Coupled with limited spaces and opportunities for individuals to practice productive conversations about various forms of oppression (e.g., race, gender, sexuality, (dis)ability, etc.) it is no surprise why we have fears and hesitations about calling attention to inequities or addressing them publicly in our messaging and communications.

Misconception # 3: “I am impartial in evaluating students.”

Rigid course standards, arbitrary classroom rules, and grading policies create a vetting process that excludes students of color. These rules are often meant to evaluate which students have the mental fortitude and capability to succeed in a discipline. For instance, instructors who prefer grading on a curve often believe in gatekeeping or maintaining rigorous standards and quotas rather than adjusting to various learning modalities to make knowledge more accessible. The act of grading on a curve, or determining grades based on students' rank and relative performance to the class distribution, has widely been proven to promote racial disparities in course outcomes. These evaluation methods are also inaccurate measures of students' talent (Reese, 2013; Eagan et al., 2012). Some disciplines like STEM, can be especially liable when creating out-of-touch course expectations that uphold meritocracy through competition and individualism (McGee, 2021), which does not accurately reflect a student's true potential in professions where success hinges on teamwork.

Misconception # 4: “I don't know ‘how to do racial equity.’”

Community college leaders and practitioners often cannot adapt their role to design and implement racial equity strategies in their practice. Part of the reason is underexposure to professional development that actively discusses race-related issues. It is challenging to develop the know-how to take a racial equity lens to inform policy and programs when training opportunities are sparse and not mandated on college campuses statewide (Hernandez-Hamed et al., 2021). Additionally, colleges are often in a constant state of initiative fatigue (Kub & Hutchings, 2015) from numerous reforms and are experiencing continued disruption from the COVID-19 global pandemic. Consistent investments that support faculty and college leaders are essential to increase the capacity of colleges to be proactive towards racial equity. Below we share four examples of how faculty, staff, and administrators can create race-conscious spaces.

PRACTICAL STEPS FOR PRACTITIONERS TO BE FRANK ABOUT RACE

Integrate Race into College Processes

Faculty, staff, and administrators should continuously engage in deep discussions around race when striving to address racialized dynamics on campus and in the classroom. Educators can leverage their growing awareness of race and racism to connect with students more closely. Instructors can create learning spaces that validate students' unique educational journeys. For example, a community college nursing professor once shared with us how she uses clinical case presentations in the lab as an opportunity to have students give five-minute introductions about themselves. They are encouraged to share their backgrounds and aspirations, including family and identity experiences that shaped their interest in STEM and clinical care. Some women and faculty of color also model for their students how to openly acknowledge the intersections between their professional and personal identities by sharing their own educational journey rife with experiences where systems of power perpetuated exclusionary practices and norms in their field. These social cues that normalize open communication in regard to race signal to students that they have permission to embrace their various identities.

Refer to Race Explicitly in Language and Campus Messaging

The language we use (e.g., spoken, written, social cues, etc.) conveys our priorities and what we deem important. Students of color must see themselves in the curriculum, have their identities and experiences affirmed in the classroom, and feel their campus community believes they can succeed. Students are not empty of racial and ethnic cultural traditions, histories, and values. Language can communicate whether institutions value the enormous contributions of students of color on college campuses. For example, the language in mission statements is one-way colleges can show commitment to racial equity. A mission statement defines the institution's purpose, priorities, and values. Consider, for example, the following section of a mission statement: Our college empowers students to be effective communicators, critical thinkers, and responsible world citizens. Would students of color feel this college prioritizes them and their communities to feel affirmed and welcomed on campus? While mission statements cannot encompass all, they signal and remind campus leaders and practitioners of institutional values and goals and create the foundation of long-term change efforts (Malcom-Piqueux & Bensimon, 2015).

Goal Setting with Racial Equity in Mind

Suppose it is never acknowledged that Black males have the widest gap in student success outcomes on campus or that women of color are the most underrepresented amongst STEM majors. How can colleges shift resources and focus on these groups specifically if no goal is in place to support them? When our institutional plans and programmatic efforts promote “equity” and “student success” in broad, generalized terms, it renders the specific challenges and needs of unique populations invisible. Strategic plans and reform goals must name racial and ethnic groups of students specifically, and these plans should have clear, quantifiable metrics in their goals. Raceless goals and priorities make it so that everyone does not have clearly defined roles or responsibilities to carry out racial equity work. Institutions are then not held accountable and racial equity becomes an unpaid burden placed on the committed staff of color who feel a sense of duty.

Evaluate Racialized Outcomes

Departments should disaggregate student success outcomes data to determine whether classroom practices are perpetuating racial disparities. They must rethink how structural forms of racism and bias affect the way they determine who has the talent and potential to succeed in the discipline. If traditional evaluation methods (i.e., curved grading, grades heavily weighted on 1-2 multiple choice exams) produce racialized outcomes, consider new practices, such as evaluating students based on how they demonstrate growth or improvement in learning specific course objectives. Instructors could also ask themselves if competitive, high-stakes exams that primarily test for rote memorization provide an accurate measure of student success. Are these techniques effective when many professions require contextual knowledge and team problem-solving? Instead, consider adopting measures of talent that show students can demonstrate critical thinking, group project performance, and the ability to analyze and critically interrogate questions. Using this range of evaluation criteria can often appeal to both students of color and women, who tend to hold a more critical worldview and often place a higher value on collaborative learning in contrast to their white male peers (Traweek, 1988; Rendon, 1994; Seymour & Hewitt, 1997). If instructors encounter racial disparities in student performance, they should redesign their evaluation processes to consider the following approaches:

- collaborative projects,
- case-based and contextualized problem-solving,
- a range of evaluation methods that consider different learning styles,
- assessing growth and improvement toward specific learning objectives,
- evaluating students independent of how others perform (e.g., not grading on a curve).

These practices can significantly reduce racial disparities in student outcomes and are pedagogically sound practices that benefit students of color. Confronting racial inequities demands that we engage in critical questions about why those inequities exist and what colleges can do to ameliorate them.

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