HOW CAN WE REDUCE RACIAL EQUITY GAPS WHEN AT A MINORITY-SERVING INSTITUTION?

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Humanizing, Caring, and Supporting People's Identities

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BIOGRAPHY

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Marcela G. Cuellar teaches in the undergraduate, EdD, and PhD programs in the School of Education at the University of California, Davis. Her research examines Latinx/a/o student experiences and outcomes at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), campus climate, and community college baccalaureates. Her commitment to higher education access and equity stems from her personal and professional experiences across California. Born and raised in Oxnard, she is the proud daughter of Mexican immigrants and the youngest of six children. She attended Stanford University and was the first in her family to earn a college degree. Her undergraduate experience inspired her to ensure more first-generation and low-income students had the opportunity to pursue a college education. She worked in educational outreach in the SF bay area and was an Upward Bound counselor in San Diego. She went on to earn a master's in Higher Education Leadership from the University of San Diego and a PhD in Higher Education and Organizational Change from UCLA. She enjoys exploring designations that are near the ocean or include traveling by train.

As part of a research team, I had the opportunity to interview students at a community college that was a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI) to understand their perceptions and experiences with the campus racial climate. Based on the demographics of the campus, we interviewed Asian, Latinx/a/o, and White students. I expected to hear positive remarks about the environment as students generally feel a sense of belonging with a greater representation of students of color on campus. In large part, I did hear these positive appraisals. Students felt welcomed and part of the campus community – this was true across all three racial groups. However, upon deeper examination, some cracks in these affirming portrayals began to emerge. We heard examples in certain spaces of exclusion and microaggressions among Latinx/a/o students, including towards English-language learners and undocumented students. On a survey, Asian students expressed more negative views of the campus racial climate than their peers. Students' candid assessments illustrated the multifaceted campus racial climate at an HSI and the importance of considering various layers of inequities in these spaces.

I continue to think about cultivating more racially just campuses by considering the intersectional needs of students as both a faculty member at an emerging HSI and in my research on emerging and designated HSIs. This is also a personal commitment given my own experiences navigating higher education as a first-generation, low-income, Latina. In this brief, I provide some ideas for how community colleges that are designated as Minority-Serving-Institutions (MSIs), such as HSIs, can reduce racial equity gaps through institutional analyses and initiatives that use an intersectional lens.

MSIS IN THE CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM

With the largest and most diverse community college system in the nation, there is no surprise that many of California's Community Colleges are Minority-serving institutions (MSIs). MSIs are a variety of federally designated institutions that educate a significant proportion of minoritized racial/ethnic groups. While some MSIs are defined by historical missions to serve historically marginalized racial groups (e.g., Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Tribal Colleges and Universities), MSI community colleges in California are defined by enrollment thresholds set by federal policy. Full-time enrollment thresholds by race/ethnicity vary at Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs), Asian American and Native American Pacific-Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), and Predominantly Black Institutions (PBIs).

Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) Designation	Enrollment Criteria for Eligibility	# of Eligible CCCs*	# of CCCs Awarded MSI Grant (2017-22)**
Asian American and Native American Pacific-Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI)	At least 10% Asian American and Native American Pacific-Islander undergraduate enrollment	43	11
Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSI)	At least 25% Latinx undergraduate enrollment	94	62
Predominantly Black Institutions (PBI)	At least 10% Black undergraduate enrollment	1	

*based on Center for Minority-Serving Institutions Eligibility Matrix
**based on Department of Education awardees, including Developing Hispanic-Serving Institutions Program - Title V; Hispanic-Serving Institutions - Science, Technology, Engineering, or Mathematics and Articulation Programs

In 2022, the Department of Education lists 94 HSIs, 43 AANAPISIs, and one PBI among CA community colleges eligible for competitive MSIs funding. Thirty-nine of these colleges are eligible for multiple designations. Since 2017, 62 HSIs and 11 AANAPISI community colleges in the state received competitive grants from the Department of Education to support efforts to increase capacity to serve these student populations.

Based on sheer enrollment, MSI community colleges educate a large racially diverse student body. Questions of how these institutions serve students beyond enrollment, however, are more complex. Racial inequities often persist in these environments in a variety of ways. In addition to funding disparities that exist between public institutions in California, MSIs receive less federal funding dollars than non-MSIs in general. In terms of student outcomes, [many MSI community colleges may retain and graduate more students than non-MSIs](#), possibly due to targeted programs and support for students of color. Some of these supports include creating culturally relevant programs, enhanced student support services, and professional development for faculty to teach in more student-centered, culturally responsive pedagogies. Yet, achieving equitable outcomes remains a challenge within some HSIs that have significant gaps in transfer rates among certain racial groups, including Latinx/a/o students.

Despite the promise and potential MSIs hold in advancing the success of minoritized communities, students on these campuses continue to face structural and systemic racism within these environments. Asian, Black, and Latinx/a/o students encounter racial microaggressions at HSI community colleges. Although more research is needed within AANAPISI and PBI community colleges, similar patterns are to be expected, especially with increased attention to anti-Blackness and anti-Asian racism since 2020 with the summer of racial reckoning and the COVID-19 pandemic.

In my opening example, students of color further observed racial microaggressions targeting subgroups within their communities, such as English learners and undocumented students. These observations were made long before the sharp increase in racist and xenophobic rhetoric towards immigrant communities of color due to the polarized national politics during the pandemic. Even more students with various intersecting identities are likely to experience oppression through individual interactions and/or systemic challenges within college campuses. AANAPISI, HSI, and PBI community colleges must address how to better serve students associated with these designations by understanding how students experience unique forms of oppression and face inequities at the intersection of their multiple identities.

CHANGING OUR PRACTICES TO ADDRESS MULTIPLE INTERSECTING IDENTITIES

Racial inequities persist because we typically examine whether disparities exist simply by race and ethnicity but often overlook groups on our campuses that remain marginalized within these larger racial groups. Dr. Gina A. Garcia and I recently co-edited an *AERA Open* special topic collection focused on intersectionality within HSIs. I draw on some of the research from this special topic collection to propose strategies for advancing racial equity at MSIs.

CONSIDER WHO REMAINS MARGINALIZED AND INVISIBLE ON YOUR CAMPUS

Practices that look at race in aggregate may ignore inequities within certain racial groups. For example, the aggregation of Asian students limits the identification of inequities within this community representing an array of immigration histories, languages, and racialization in the United States, particularly among Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander students. Immigration and generational status are likely to create a unique set of challenges for students from other racial groups. Recent immigrants and refugees from Central and South America, some of whom are also LGBTQ, are likely to face different challenges from their non-immigrant, first-generation, low-income peers. Undocumented students also face additional financial barriers from their peers who hold documentation and there are likely unique challenges for those who are DACAmented and those who are not eligible for this temporary federal relief. Staff and faculty at HSIs who are prepared to support Latinx/a/o students in general, can still be ill-prepared to address the unique and layered issues that come with a student being an undocumented Central American immigrant who is LGBTQ. Without taking a step back to think about how certain groups and their specific needs may be overlooked, certain inequities will remain invisible and so will these students and their

needs. While the majority of Latinx/a/o students are first-generation college students, not all are. Many are children of Latinx/a/o immigrants but several are also from families who have been in California or the US for multiple generations. Latinx/a/o students are thus highly diverse on a range of characteristics. Too often though, Dr. Casella Connors (2021) finds that these complexities are largely unaddressed at HSI community colleges in California, Florida, and Texas. How might you begin to explore how students with multiple marginalized identities experience your campus?

Leaders at HSIs, AANAPISIs, and PBIs should explore and learn more about the marginalizing experiences students within the respective target racial group they enroll. Understanding how colorism, anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-Asian racism further operates within communities of color, such as the recent scandal in the Los Angeles City Council uncovered, can help community college leaders disrupt problematic narratives and marginalizing experiences for individuals on their campuses. Certain racial or ethnic groups may also feel invisible under the Latinx/a/o panethnic category. While most Latinx/a/o students in California are of Mexican descent, not all are. Dr. Kovats Sánchez (2021) describes how Indigenous Mixtec/Ñuu Savi students who are often identified as Latinx/a/o remain invisibilized on campus and have to often educate others on their heritage. To more intentionally support and serve this population of students, MSIs must recognize the presence and experiences of Indigenous students within the Latinx/a/o community. How might the experiences of students who self-identify as Indigenous, Central American, Afro Latinx/a/o, Asian Latinx/a/o, differ on your campus? How might your campus modify the curriculum and institutional practices in order to remove the labor students take on to educate us?

Integrate Intersectional Analyses in Institutional Research and Planning

As leaders become more familiar with various subgroups on campus that may face unique challenges, such as Indigenous students or Afro-Latinx/a/os, a next step could be to integrate intersectional analyses to identify possible inequities among and between groups and guide future institutional plans. The lack of demographic data that explores different social identities more deeply among students is a major challenge. Too often, racial groups are aggregated to identify racial equity gaps. These analyses continue to be necessary given persistent gaps. However, these approaches limit the ability to explore other inequities among certain racial groups or across various inequities simultaneously.

Gather Finer Grained Student Demographic Data.

College leaders should thus gather more data on social identities that may shape students' experiences and outcomes. Some of these data should include demographic data within racial groups, such as ethnic origins, language, generational status, socioeconomic status, and immigration status. These additional data can help campuses more richly understand their student population and the extent to which this reflect the surrounding demographics of their service region. Importantly, data should be gathered and protected with the safety of students in mind, especially with respect to immigration status, gender identity, and sexual orientation.

Disaggregate Data to Examine Intersections.

Institutional research plans can use these data to examine disparities in outcomes across groups and provide a fuller picture of the necessary supports institutions can provide to enhance students' educational and career pathways. Adopting these layered examinations aligns with some principles of critical quantitative intersectional analysis.

Such analyses should explore intracategorical and intercategorical intersectionality. Intracategorical intersectionality refers to exploring differences within a particular dominant identity and various intersecting identities. For example, intracategorical comparisons can center racial background as an identity (e.g. Latinx/a/o) and explore differences by gender, and generational status (e.g. Latina first-generation females [referent] as compared to Latino first-generation males, Latina continuing generation females, Latino continuing generation males, Latinx first-generation non-binary students, Latinx continuing generation non-binary students). In turn, intercategorical refers to centering comparisons across race, gender, and generational status (e.g. White first-generation females [referent] as compared to Latino first-generation males, Asian continuing generation non-binary students, Black continuing generation females, etc.). Each of these comparisons are premised on the idea that each of these categories is fundamentally different according to experiences with multiple systems of oppression and privilege. While cell sizes may limit some of these comparisons, campuses should explore which comparisons are possible for identifying areas for campus improvement.

Employ Qualitative and Mixed-Methods.

In addition, MSI leaders should use various approaches to understand students' experiences and outcomes to identify structural and institutional barriers. The combination of data collection methods in the opening vignette shows certain insights can be missed in a strictly quantitative approach. Our survey findings only showed one group as having significantly more negative perceptions of the campus racial climate. However, quantitative approaches may not capture the range of experiences students may have at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression. Interviews, focus groups, and testimonios can thus center students' experiences and trajectories in richer ways. Students can offer fresh perspectives on what is working and what needs improvement for their and their peers' success. By spending time listening to students' experiences and obtaining their feedback, we can build educational environments that honor these perspectives and inform how we can transform MSIs to better serve them.

Educate and Assess Beyond Parity in Outcomes.

Aiming to address racial inequities on common educational outcomes, such as persistence and degree attainment are irrefutably important. But even when gaps are reduced or parity is achieved, marginalization and inequities may exist in other experiences or outcomes. Suppose students complete their certificate or AA or transfer despite racism or sexism they encountered during their time on your campus. Faculty, staff, and counselors should aim to not only support students navigating discrimination but also disrupt these patterns from recurring. MSIs are in a unique position to empower and liberate individuals that are minoritized in society. Centering this transformative power of education is all the more important at MSIs. Thus, leaders should think about how they are also advancing non-academic outcomes, such as social consciousness, civic engagement, and graduate school aspirations and how they are assessing these outcomes.

CENTER RACE CONSCIOUSNESS AND INTERSECTIONAL SERVINGNESS IN MSI GRANTS

As eligible MSIs seek grants to support initiatives, educators at these institutions should center racial equity and intersectionality in these proposals. Most HSI grants are race-neutral and lack an intersectional lens, significantly reducing the likelihood that racial equity can be achieved. HSI grants should intentionally support Latinx/a/o students. Other MSI grants should similarly center race conscious initiatives. Using evidence from intersectional analyses, HSIs and MSIs, more broadly, can propose institutional changes and programs that address inequities among marginalized identities within and across racial groups. Similar approaches can be used for Student Equity Plans. Learning more about how current practices render certain groups invisible and adopting new approaches that center intersectional servingness can help us more comprehensively address racial inequities within MSIs.

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