



USC Race and
Equity Center

**POST AB705, HOW DO
WE DO THE HARD
WORK OF ENGAGING IN
RACIALLY-EQUITABLE
CURRICULAR REFORM?**

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*Humanizing, Caring, and
Supporting People's
Identities*

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BIOGRAPHY



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BIOGRAPHY



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Erik Armstrong is Professor of English at College of the Sequoias. A proud alumni of the California Community College system, Erik started his higher education journey at Shasta Junior College and then completed his B.A. and M.A. at California State University, Chico. Teaching academic and creative writing, Erik returned to community colleges to be part of the community that provided him so many opportunities. Always passionate about teaching and learning, Erik has also engaged in the field of professional learning, serving as a Regional Coordinator for the California Community College Success Network (3CSN), the Faculty Enrichment Chair, and on the English Taskforce for the Central Valley Higher Education Consortium (CVHEC). Erik is also an advocate for developmental education reform and has served as his college's AB 705 Coordinator for English and ESL. That advocacy, combined with his life growing up with mixed Filipino and white ancestry, has infused his work with a passion for racial equity in community college outcomes. His recent work has been published in *Composition Studies*.



“Many multicultural initiatives derail because people are unaware and/or unable to manage the defensive reactions that interrupt dialog about power, privilege, and oppression.”

— Sherry K. Watt, “*Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model Revisited*”

The summer of 2020 was a catalyst for continued advancement for racial equity. Following George Floyd’s murder, and the deaths of so many Black citizens, the nation was charged with activism and advocacy for racial equity. Feeling the swell of that activism and understanding the role higher education plays in society, Chancellor Oakley put out a Call-to-Action (California Community College Chancellor’s Office, 2020). So, too, did the President of the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, John Stankas (2020). Both called on faculty to revise curricula toward inclusion, diversity, and anti-racism.

We, the authors, both English professors at the College of the Sequoias and practitioners in local and statewide professional development, felt the quake of those calls to action. Suddenly, on a statewide level, the equity conversation was shifting. Rather than higher education being conceived of as distant and separate from the racial inequities of the nation, our system leaders were talking about our colleges and classrooms as both central to the problem and potential solutions to addressing those inequities. Rather than revising policies and making conceptual commitments to equity, we, the faculty, were being asked what we could do in ourselves, our own pedagogy, and our curricula to be more inclusive, culturally responsive, and racially equitable.

That groundswell moved even our rural college in the Central Valley. Our campus leaders shared the Chancellor's and Academic Senate's messages, held college-wide equity events, and encouraged faculty to revise curriculum accordingly. At the start of Fall 2020, our English department convened a committee to revise our transfer-level English composition course. The committee was composed of both new and tenured, part- and full-time colleagues with different levels of skill and will to make equitable change.

Unfortunately, much like the nationwide struggle for equity, the road forward was not easy. While the initial commitment to this committee was projected to be only a few months, the process of revising our curriculum took an entire academic year. This was not due to a lack of ideas, proposed changes based on research-driven models, or considerations based on the needs and demographics of our students. Rather, we reached an impasse based on personal philosophy, pedagogical approach, and defense of past curricular practices. We lacked the tools to look at our practices through a critical lens together, and, more importantly, personal pedagogical differences conflicted with what was best for students, charging our conversations with distrust and resistance.

After almost a year of work and a series of open sessions about the proposed revisions with the department, the revised course outline was eventually approved. Despite an overwhelming majority vote in favor of the course outline revisions, the resistance to these changes resulted in a fallout far beyond the curriculum: the revisions were challenged on academic freedom grounds, which delayed the implementation of the course outline; harassment complaints were filed against supporters of the revisions; grievances were filed about resolution processes; and generally department cohesion and trust remains damaged.

With such a broad and disastrous fallout, it is reasonable for instructors to wonder, how can we revise productively while maintaining department collaboration and cohesion?

ACCESS IS NOT ENOUGH

Some might claim that curricular revision is not necessary, that all the recent reforms are enough. That, however, is not true. California's Assembly Bill (AB) 705 (2017) dramatically increased student access to and completion of transfer-level English courses, particularly for Latinx and Black students. In 2020, the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) proclaimed, "One of the most immediate and notable outcomes of AB 705 has been the dramatic improvement in equitable access to college composition" (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2020, p. 11). In August of this year, PPIC corroborated those results, stating, "Access to college composition is nearly universal. After AB 705 implementation, 96 percent of students who took an English course for the first time enrolled in college composition" (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2022). The access gaps between white, Latino, Black, and Asian students remained stable, ranging from 1 - 3 percentage points (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2022).

However, despite the dramatic increases we've seen in access, equity gaps still persist. In 2020, PPIC identified significant increases in completion of transfer-level English for all groups, but for Black and Latino students, their success still lagged behind their white counterparts, 23 and 15 percentage points respectively (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2020, p. 23). Two years later, PPIC's reported numbers have not changed, "...[C]ompletion rates continue to be significantly lower among Black and Latino students: a 22 percentage point gap between Black and white students; and a 14 percentage point gap between Latino students and white students" (Cuellar Mejia et al., 2022).

These improvements and persistent gaps were echoed locally for us at our college. While AB 705 greatly increased throughput rates across the board and equity gaps decreased, particularly for Latinx students (our main student body population), both Black and Latinx students still trailed behind their white peers post-AB 705, an average of 21 and 11 percentage points respectively (College of the Sequoias).

Malcolm Gladwell's *Revisionist History* podcast gives us some insight into why these equity gaps are so pernicious. Gladwell (2017) explores the persistent racial disparities in our educational system, despite segregation ostensibly ending with the landmark ruling of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. Gladwell finds a powerful interview with Celestine

Porter¹, a black educator from Richmond, Virginia. Critiquing *Brown v. Board of Education*'s decision, Porter notes, “[The Supreme Court] made one serious mistake which I will have to hold them responsible for. They made students do the integration; they should have had teachers first...Now, the first people that should have been integrated should have been teachers and administration first.” Hold that for a moment: **the teachers and administration should have integrated first.**

Porter's critique has an eerie resonance with AB 705's reform. Touted as landmark legislation for racial equity—and it is—AB 705 effectively mainstreamed all the students, preventing them from being segregated into various remedial levels that did not count toward their educational goals, but it also did little besides recommending institutions to reform the curriculum, classrooms, and instructors. With this in mind, it becomes clearer why persistent equity gaps remain. With limited guidance, incentive, support, and

accountability, we have done little to prepare the way for students of color who had been historically excluded. The curriculum of transfer-level classes are still the capstones of deep remedial sequences, and they need to remain so to maintain articulation. Transfer-level course classrooms remain gatekeepers for academic preparation. If we leave achieving racial equity solely up to the individual choice of each instructor, as a system we may not see progress, so we need methods for engaging faculty, both individually and collaboratively, in racial equity reform.

Persistent gaps equity gaps left us with important questions to address:

- How do we prepare ourselves to teach students of color and support their success in our transfer-level courses?
- How do we create and sustain those efforts on our college campuses to improve retention and success for students of color?
- How can we do this in an environment where resistance, defensiveness, and divisiveness can arise in response to those efforts?

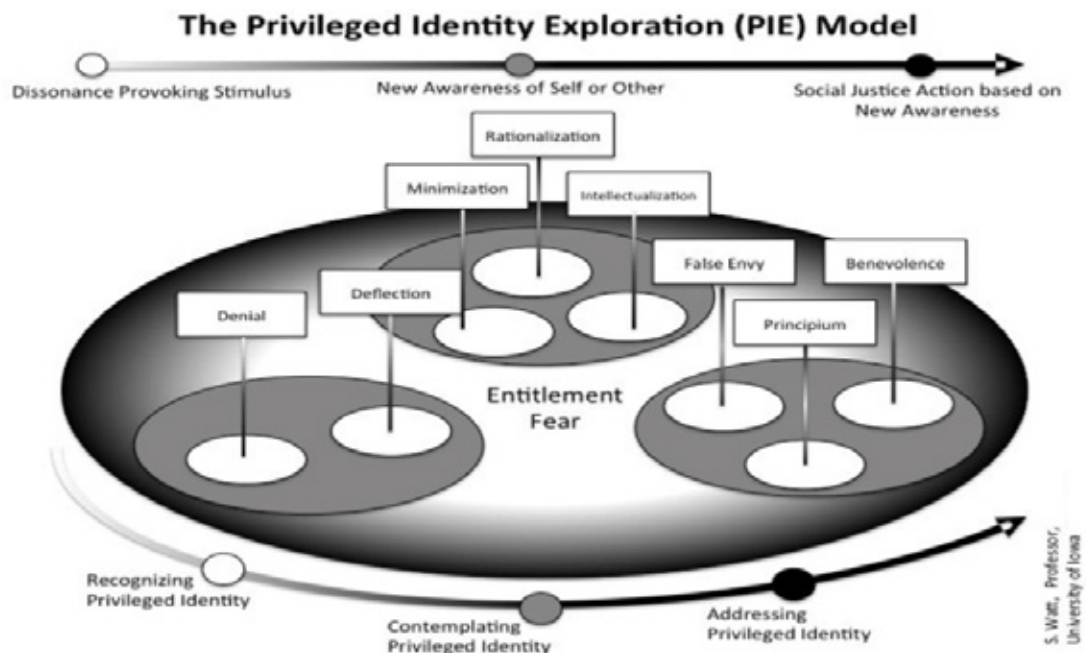
While we removed biased placement measures and increased access, the changes did not change the curriculum nor the instructor pedagogies.

¹ Her full interview can be found at: Duke University. (1995, August 2). Celestine Diggs Porter interview. *Repository collections and archives: Behind the veil*. <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/behindtheveil/btvcto8o7o>

FRAMEWORKS FOR ENGAGING FACULTY IN EQUITABLE REFORM

Interrogating Defenses: The Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model

Interrogating that gap in preparing the way for students, however, is not a neutral act. Suggesting revisions to perceptions of transfer-level classes and students, to pedagogical approaches, and to long-standing curriculum can stir the proverbial hornet's nest, as it did in our case. The work is messy because it is ongoing and vulnerable and personal as it challenges many of the assumptions upon which our identities as educators have been built. Unfortunately, we do not talk about the personal and professional biases that we must unpack to engage in racial equity. We do not discuss how this work will trigger our defenses, but we need to. We need a framework to understand and name those defenses so that we can move through them.



The Privileged Identity Exploration Model (PIE Model) by Sherry K. Watt (2015b) provides a method to identify eight defense behaviors or mindsets individuals display when involved in difficult dialogues about social justice issues:

Defensive Behaviors	Definition
Denial	Denies the existence of the issue (Ex.: There is no racism here.)
Deflection	Shifts the focus away from the issue and onto something else (Ex.: We don't need to change our practices. Students just need more support services.)
Minimization	Downplays emotional impact or severity of the issue (Ex.: It's only a handful of students; it's not that bad.)
Rationalization	Generates alternative explanations for the problem (Ex.: Students aren't successful because they aren't prepared for college work.)
Intellectualization	Creates distance from the issue by considering it from a larger lens of social or political commentary, prioritizing thought and theory over emotion. (Ex.: We can't get too emotional with this.)
Principum	Uses principles of moral and personal belief to shut down ideas (Ex.: This violates my freedom.)
False Envy	Denies the complexity of an issue by focusing on a single feature of it (Ex.: I'm not a Black woman with your experience, so I can't contribute to that.)
Benevolence	Mirrors a savior mindset (one act of charity solves the issue, rather than getting to the root of the problem) (Ex.: We provide resources to have an A2MEND club, so our black students are obviously well supported.)

In our experience, we have found many of our colleagues caught in the stage of contemplating privileged identity by minimizing, rationalizing, and intellectualizing. In our case, this was our attachment to specific aspects of our curriculum, how we defined our work, and the self-worth we attributed to it. As we did not have a framework to understand and discuss how and why we were getting stuck, our defenses remained present, and we failed to move through the difficult dialogue around course revision and its personal effect on our classroom practice. While the necessity of engaging with the PIE Model was most

present for our white colleagues, it is important to consider how all of us needed to participate in the unpacking of bias that is inherent to our academic training (Intellectualization) and performance of professional identity (Benevolence). The lingering tension and philosophical divide that this process revealed creates an opportunity to advocate for professional development that requires us to examine our social coordination² and move beyond our defenses in the pursuit of equitable curriculum.

Using the Privileged Identity Model to examine defense responses will allow campus groups to destigmatize difficult discussions about racial equity. It can be used as a tool to evaluate how collaboration may be stalled by personal biases and open an invitation to personal dialogue. One way we have started to consider the PIE model is in the initial conversations of a hiring committee, asking participants to share their vision for the upcoming hire and the department's values. Next, participants are asked how these values connect to or challenge our equity goals and EEO procedures. Using a critical lens, we can analyze where our biases lie, especially related to what we have identified as our equity needs for our campus. When we take the time to set up this kind of dialogue, for example before and/or along with pedagogical and curricular reform discussions, we can unpack the historical, social and political assumptions about each other and the project that often prevent successful collaboration. Doing the work of recognizing and addressing one's privileged identity gives us a measurable progression toward authentic engagement. This is the beginning of the work of solution building rather than perpetuating surface-level change.

AAFES Method, a Framework for Sustained Engagement

In addition to models that helped describe how personal defenses disrupt equitable progress, we needed models that helped explain how we could approach future work more effectively. In *Designing Transformational Multicultural Initiatives*, Sherry K. Watt's (2015a) "Authentic, Action-Oriented, Framing for Environmental Shifts Method (AAFES) Method" outlines a process that colleges (departments, divisions, campuses, colleges, districts) can follow to improve equitable outcomes and dismantle systemic oppression. . This method requires that participants develop their skills to engage in difficult dialogue and effectively evaluate the quality of their process. The evaluation process involves many steps of critical

²Social Coordination refers to the common forms and default rules of social organizations that legitimize specific institutional practices and notions of labor and/value, which often cast divisions of opinion as problematic, rather than opportunities for personal and professional growth.

reflection aimed at “transforming dehumanizing environments and nurturing a cultural setting where people within it can be more fully human” (Watt, 2015a, p. 28). Watt explains that in the AAFES method “participants are not able to take action unless they learn ‘to identify, explore, validate, and express affect.’” (Watt, 2015a, p.28). Watt posits that the emotional and intellectual exploration of oppressive systems within higher education go hand-in-hand, and that transformation to the system occurs when individuals are fully a part of the deconstruction/reconstruction process.

Following the three elements of the AAFES method, we reflected on what this method requires, as well as where we succeeded and faltered to discover the gaps in our collaborative process. First, “Authentic” work requires a critical engagement with our own beliefs and identities, intentional discourse with our colleagues and campus collaborators, and an openness to personal transformation. Having no spaces dedicated to learning together that were not connected to objectives and deliverables, our curriculum revision efforts resulted in inauthentic participation that was primarily concerned with anticipating changes and taking sides without meaningfully discussing our personal growth, connection, and positionality. This also served to perpetuate closed communicative practices that were disconnected from personal transformation.

To be “Action-Oriented,” Watt suggests wrestling with important questions and using innovative strategies that exemplify how diversity is valued. While we maintained some balance between thought and action, we lacked the stamina to sit with the discomfort necessary to innovate, and because we did not engage authentically, we did not prepare ourselves to have difficult conversations that naturally arose from revising long-standing and closely-held curriculum. We needed to engage in dialogue, without speaking from our defenses, to move forward meaningfully with the revisions and with our ability to discuss those revisions and their impact. We learned that creating a space for exploring meaningful questions could allow us to discover innovative strategies to value diversity in a more complex way and value this work as both personally and professionally constructive.

The last element of the AAFES method, “Framing for Environmental Shifts,” asks for the direct naming of structural inequities, an awareness of power dynamics, and an active shift of the social/cultural/political environment for inclusion. This reflects our biggest gap in addressing systemic oppression, in this instance and at all levels in our institution, and

increasing our capacity to make cultural change. While inclusivity was an explicit part of our efforts, we were too focused on the perspective of all faculty members, not the perspectives of students systematically oppressed by the curriculum—the students whose success we were attempting to improve. We were not intentional in naming the ways power was exerted in the course outline, such as the privileging of antiquated processes and beliefs that were based on past practices (e.g., the five-paragraph essay, skill and drill mechanics exercises, SAE supremacy) rather than current research, recent classroom experience, and student feedback. We lacked the directness to call this out because we were all stuck in the performance of expected social norms and appeasing those that we knew would be challenged by these changes.

Watt’s AAFES Method is complex, but through it Watt provides a useful means for faculty to frame their efforts toward racial equity, helping define steps and approaches as well as evaluate their efforts in progress. To help practitioners visualize this framework in action, the following table connects Watt’s three aspects of the AAFES Method with example practices relevant to our experience with curriculum reform, highlighting necessary skills for sustainable equity initiatives and linking them with the PIE Model to improve our ability to imagine and enact institutional transformation:

AAFES Qualities	Example Practices for English Curriculum Revision ³
<p>Authentic Process Quality: Focus on You, not the Other</p>	<p>Before engaging in the specific curriculum revisions, give faculty ample time to focus on their personal and collective growth and learning, examining and reflecting upon their positionality. Include in this Watt’s (2015b) PIE Model to explore privileged identities, as well as anticipate, explain, and respond to defensive reactions. This will allow participants to develop, as Watt (2015a) says, “the skills of noticing (thoughts, information) nurturing (emotion, personal connections), and naming (meaning making)” issues related to curricular reform (p. 35). Reflection should center on personal authenticity and growth in relation to how traditional curriculum and pedagogical practices have perpetuated systemic oppression.</p>

³ Watt’s AAFES Method (2015a, p. 35) adapted for example practices inspired by our own curricular reform efforts.

AAFES Qualities	Example Practices for English Curriculum Revision ³
<p>Action-Oriented Process Quality: Focus on thoughtful balance between dialogue and action</p>	<p>Develop specific goals and outcomes for curriculum revision and begin to work toward them. Within that context, faculty should deconstruct the structural inequities associated with racial disparities in access and completion of English composition, and reconstruct an environment of inclusion and equity, all the while focusing on “developing the skills of mustering the stamina to sit with discomfort, engage in difficult dialogue, and continuously seek critical consciousness” (Watt, 2015a, p. 35). Dialog should, ideally, be balanced with action, informing results, not delaying meaningful progress and centering the issue of inequitable success rates, developing the above skills within the socio-historical context of racial inequity in English composition.</p>
<p>Framing for Environmental Shifts Process Quality: Focus on shifting the environment for inclusion not surviving dehumanization</p>	<p>Faculty begin to understand curricular changes within the larger context, discussing, for example, how the entire English pathway might be revised to be inclusive of all students, regardless of age, race, disability, etc. This focus necessitates the understanding of how structural inequities limit the liberation of all, developing skepticism about existing structures, and making thriving, not surviving, the status quo. This includes “developing the skills of keeping a flexible mind-set and a level of healthy skepticism about structures; viewing missteps as developmental rather than as fatal flaws; and holding the tension of paradoxes, which have competing and ambiguous conflicting notions in context” (Watt, 2015a, p. 35).</p>

POST AB 705, IT'S UP TO US

The future of the California community college is clear in one aspect: It must be racially equitable. Even though AB 1705 (2022) was just signed into law, it will not address local curricular and pedagogical impacts on racial equity, and this is not an issue we can solely legislate our way through. As Ms. Porter said, educational institutions—faculty and administration in particular—need to integrate themselves. To that end, we acknowledge several important factors of this racial equity work for curricular reform:

- 1. It is difficult and messy and necessary.** We understand that discussing privileged identities, pedagogical approaches, and traditional curriculum in connection with racial inequity can be like the “third rail,” dangerous and difficult to discuss. Because our professional identities are wrapped up in the processes, power, and social relationships of our institutions, racial equity becomes that much harder. In our pursuit of equity, we have been called bullies, shills, racists, and “woke jihadists.” We have been yelled at, cursed, and ignored. We have been accused of lowering standards and harassment. Still, it is incumbent upon us to undertake the work. Higher education has historically been a site of racial inequality and oppression. Making such a space racially equitable requires complex, multi-layered approaches that seek to address those inequities and reform our institutions accordingly.
- 2. It must be systematic and institutionalized.** Since the work is difficult, it cannot be approached haphazardly or randomly. Instead, equity initiatives need to be pursued with a framework that helps (re)define goals and outcomes, personal and communal relationships, and the environment in which those occur. Watt’s PIE Model and AAFES Method allow participants to frame racial equity work, navigate their experiences, and respond to and move through defensive reactions while moving toward a future of racial equity. Equity champions on campus are vital to the success of any equity initiative, but they are ultimately insufficient by themselves, and the work is even more arduous if professional development doesn’t extend from and across the institution.

3. **It must center racial (in)equity.** It is also not enough for designers of and participants in equity initiatives to have a general, neutral understanding of equity. These stripped-down versions of equity risk creating “lethal mutations,” leaving racial inequity and its underlying causes unaddressed and thus perpetuated (Hernandez-Hamed, et al., 2022, p. 15). We believe the above methods will allow equity initiatives to include as many constituent perspectives as possible and situate and center that initiative around difference, racial inequity, power, and oppression.

4. **It must be continuous and recursive.** As AB 705 has shown us, key initiatives can have a dramatic impact on racial equity, but those singular initiatives are often incomplete by themselves, so initiatives should be returned to and reexamined to sustain and improve on equitable results.

For us, we learned these lessons too late to change the fallout of our transfer-level English revisions, but they can help inform our future efforts, as well as help other colleges begin their own racially equitable revisions. Community colleges predominately serve students of color, and the past several years have revealed to us that we have done good work to make community colleges more racially equitable, but it is also clear that more work needs to be done (see Camardelle et al., 2022). We can do that by building on statewide policy reform by turning our attention inward toward our curriculum, our classrooms, and ourselves and consciously designing them for racial equity. Our students depend on it.

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