

Moving The Needle:

Are Community
Colleges in Colorado
Equity-Ready?

Dra. Susana M. Muñoz,
Equity Champion Consultant
Colorado

Dra. Reyna M. Anaya,
Equity Champion Consultant
Colorado



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Overview

As higher education institutions across Colorado continue to address the impact of COVID19 on enrollment and identify practices that promote student success and institutional sustainability, many are focusing their attention on the enrollment of adult learners. In Colorado, adults ages 24 to 44 are the fastest growing population with a 14.7% growth projection by 2030, a 7.9% higher increase than adults 18 to 24 who are of traditional college-going age. This demographic shift in age, otherwise known as the 2025 higher education enrollment cliff, must also be intersectional and include racial and ethnic identity given the increase in racially minoritized populations. For Colorado, the Hispanic/Latinx population has seen a 19.2% increase from 2010 to 2020, which has already created implications for higher education practice and student success.

The Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) has actively engaged in building awareness and understanding of the demographic changes impacting postsecondary attainment. In doing so, CDHE aligned its attainment practices for adults 25 to 64 with Lumina Foundation's Path Toward Equity Tool, which seeks to reach 66% completion nationally by 2025. Through this commitment, Colorado's overall attainment rate has increased from 45.8% in 2009 to 61% in 2019 for adults 25-64 years old, mainly due to the inclusion of workforce (2013-2014) and industry (2017-2018) certificates in attainment calculations. However, despite having the second highest attainment rate in the country amongst adults 25-64, alarming racial and ethnic disparities continue to exist amongst Coloradans who identify as African American/Black, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Hispanic/Latinx in comparison to their White counterparts (e.g., Table 1).

Table 1
Attainment Rates Among Racial Identity in Colorado for Adults 25-64 Years Old

Racial Identity	Overall Population Percentage	Attainment Rate	Gap to White counterparts (59.1%)	Gap to 66% Attainment Goal
African American/Black	125K	37.9%	21.2%	28.1%
Asian American	110K	64.1%	(5%)	1.9%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	17.5K	30.9%	28.2%	35.1%
Hispanic	605K	21.5%	34%	40.9%
White	2.17M	59.1%		6.9%

Source: Lumina Foundation (2022). National Attainment by Race & Ethnicity 2009-2019.

The gaps mentioned above cannot be solved in isolation or by one institution type. However, community colleges can be one of the solutions to higher attainment rates and equity gaps. The open access mission and commitment to the social and economic mobility of underserved and underrepresented student populations such as racially minoritized adults ages 25-64 make community colleges a smart choice for students to further their education and/or workforce development. Nevertheless, in order to be a solution, various considerations need to be addressed. Throughout this brief, we provide an overview of the legislature and equity efforts and present recommendations for community colleges to apply equity-minded practices in closing the attainment gap amongst racially diverse students.

Colorado Legislative Landscape

College access and success have been central tenets of the State of Colorado legislature over the past year, which can positively impact adult students of color attending community colleges. Gaining knowledge and understanding about financial aid options to attend college is highlighted in [HB22-1366](#) (Improving Students' Post-secondary Options). Adult students of color can also benefit from the creative ways institutions plan to create pathways for credentialing that intentionally lead to degree attainment (see Opportunities for Credential Attainment (SB22-192)). Further, the guidelines presented in [HB22-1349](#) (Postsecondary Student Success Data System) task the Colorado Department of Higher Education to develop a statewide student success data system that will help identify equity gaps for adult students of color by disaggregating student success metrics. From an outside perspective, the State of Colorado seems to be proactive in addressing equity issues within community colleges and higher education. Despite the fundamental equity gaps in educational attainment among Black, Latinx, and Indigenous college students, we pose a critical question to our education colleagues, why haven't we moved the equity gap needle? Are we using an equity or anti-racism perspective as we consider access and success for adult students of color?

Equity is Colorado's Priority

To us, it is clear from the review of policy reports and state priorities that equity IS central to Colorado colleges and universities in how they envision their future. One report, in particular, *Creating a Colorado for All: Report on Education Equity*, highlights state legislature, and the abundance of networks and resources dedicated to enacting equity-based teaching, policies, recruitment, and retention are tremendous efforts towards improving the equity gaps in postsecondary attainment for students of color. The Colorado Department of Higher Education (CDHE) recently hired Dr. Roberto Montoya as the Director of Equity to lead the state's effort to create equity-informed practices and policies in higher education. Dr. Montoya brings teaching experience to his role as a former instructor of social foundations of race and racism at the University of Colorado-Denver. Additionally, the CDHE has also generated Equity Tool Kits for educators which provide knowledge and awareness about creating inclusive and welcoming campus and classroom environments. However, as scholar-activists rooted in equity and justice, we challenge CDHE to elevate its efforts by focusing more on the adult student populations in Colorado. We offer questions and thoughts for our colleagues to ponder as we consider ways to center equity in postsecondary degree attainment.

Towards an Equity-Minded Colorado Community College System

We feel incredibly fortunate that Colorado has a strong community of equity-minded higher education practitioners and scholars dedicated to transforming our institutional cultures and climates into spaces where students of color can thrive. Here, we operationalize equity-mindedness as

...the perspective or mode of thinking exhibited by practitioners who call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes. These practitioners are willing to take personal and institutional responsibility for the success of their students, and critically reassess their own practices. It also requires that practitioners are race-conscious and aware of the social and historical context of exclusionary practices in American Higher Education.

This definition warrants unpacking, and here, we focus on the social and historical context of exclusionary practices and critical reassessment.

Racial Reckoning

We begin with racial reckoning as part of the strategic tenor of all community colleges. Equity acknowledges the uneven power distribution from a historical, structural, and systemic perspective. For community colleges, acknowledging past injustices against communities of color requires naming racism as the root cause and understanding how our contemporary practices and policies continue to reproduce bias and structural racism. First, institutions must be responsible for transforming cultures and climates conducive to optimal learning outcomes. Second, educators and leaders all have the best intentions to employ culturally sustaining pedagogies and provide validating student support services. However, we question whether we are working to disrupt powers and systems of oppression and racism or is the concept of equity additive rhetoric applied to unexamined structures and policies that were not designed with minoritized students in mind? For instance, when we examine the reform movement within Guided Pathways, equity is central to the discussion but framed in race-neutrality. Dr. Estela Bensimon states, “adopters of the term equity rarely acknowledge the racial justice meaning and agenda of equity. They do not see or know that whiteness circulates through structures, policies, practices, and values that are typically assumed to be fair and race-neutral” (2018, p. 97). We wholeheartedly agree that peppering the rhetoric of equity within our practice without applying a race-conscious analysis risks these well-intended efforts, and has the potential to further reproduce inequities. How can our metric of student success be constructed through a racial equity lens?

Equity acknowledges the uneven power distribution from a historical, structural, and systemic perspective

Equity-Minded Assessment

Cultivating racial consciousness within community colleges can be accomplished through a social justice assessment (Henning & Lundquist, 2018). Moving beyond white normative standards toward equity and addressing racial equity gaps in higher education requires college leaders to develop a “critical consciousness of harmful racialized discourse” in data and assessment work (Dowd & Elmore, 2020, p.167). To move beyond solely illuminating systemic inequities and towards change, Dowd and Elmore (2020) suggest leaders should develop an equity-minded approach by (1) engaging in trust-building behavior, (2) developing a capacity for racism-conscious interpretations of inequities, (3) articulating an anti-racist stance, and (4) developing a multifocal lens for leadership. An equity-minded leadership approach towards assessment places responsibility on the institutions to address equity gaps, change policies and practices that disproportionately impact minoritized students, and address deficits of the institution.

One of the leading equity experts in community colleges, Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallaher amplifies, “It has become clear through the conversations, an assessment process that is not mindful of equity can risk becoming a tool that promotes inequities, whether intentional or otherwise, leading to a broadening of the conversation from culturally responsive assessment to how assessment could address equity in education” (Zamani-Gallaher, 2017). Community colleges understand the intricacies of their backyards, so their ability to pinpoint gaps and opportunities to address their own campus needs is a strength. However, if community colleges in Colorado are interested in erasing the equity gap, constructing a system-wide assessment tool rooted in race consciousness will allow us to identify the gaps within our organizational structures and systems. One example could be system-wide, campus climate assessments.



Questions to Ponder

As community college leaders think more about transformational change within the context of equity and adult students' success, we ask our colleagues to consider the following questions:

- What are the organizational expectations and mechanisms of accountability in place for faculty and staff to understand and enact culturally sustaining student services practices?
- How do faculty and staff come together to discuss enacting equity in their practice without shame?
- How are faculty training in culturally sustaining pedagogies?
- How are staff and faculty held accountable for the success of adult students of color that they serve?
- Adult students are the experts in their own lived experiences, but they are rarely invited into the conversation about which policies and services are meeting their needs. How do we know what adult students need if we are not providing space and a climate for feedback?
- In what ways are the staff and faculty representation reflective of the lived experiences of adult students?
- How are community colleges accommodating work and families within course delivery and classroom expectations?
- How are the voices of adult students central to industry and community college partnerships?



Conclusion

Colorado has taken great strides in creating an excellent hub of resources aimed at providing college and university staff and faculty a sense of awareness and knowledge. However, in order to really move the equity needle, we believe we could do better in developing accountability metrics, understanding that race and racism are endemic to our educational structures and system, and constantly interrogating our policies and practices that uphold whiteness and white supremacy. Beautiful transformation comes with normalizing uncomfortable conversations and action. Colorado has an opportunity to be bold and courageous in its equity efforts by not only recognizing that racism is the culprit for racial disparities in our educational system but also using racial consciousness to shift our policies and practices.

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