

Creating a New Agenda:

How Board of Trustee
Members Advance
an Equity-Minded
Agenda for Racial/
Ethnic Minoritized
Student Groups in
Texas Community
Colleges¹

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Should you want to learn more about the REACH Collaborative and its partners (*Education Strategy Group (ESG)*, the *Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL)* at the University of Illinois, University of Pittsburgh *School of Education*, and evaluation consulting firm *DVP-PRAXIS LTD*), please visit reachcollab.org.

The community college landscape has changed over the last couple of years due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Recent national research centers reveal that community colleges have faced student enrollment declines due to the pandemic and economic uncertainty (Huie, et al., 2021). With a closer look at these declines, students of color (e.g., African American, and Hispanic) had the largest enrollment declines (Huie, et al., 2021). Scholars have noted that community colleges provide the most accessible pathways for these students due to open admissions policies (Ocean, et al., 2022), flexible class offerings (Grosz, et al., 2022), and affordable tuition rates (Hallberg et al., 2022). Nonetheless, previous admissions policies (e.g., re-enrollment guidelines), teaching practices (e.g., in-person classroom attendance), or outreach programs (e.g., orientation sessions) are no longer sufficient to reverse the enrollment declines, lower persistence progress, or declining degree (or credentials) completion rates. These challenges compel community college leaders (e.g., Board of Trustee members, central administration, and academic deans) to create an institutional narrative to address the declining enrollment trends and educational outcomes, specifically for racial/ethnic minoritized student groups³. *The purpose of this policy brief is to highlight the brave and essential conversations of Texas community college leaders to advance an equity-minded agenda for racial/ethnic minoritized student groups during the pandemic era.* The guiding principle of this brief is to illustrate the importance of community college leadership engaged in critical conversations to shape institutional policies, programs, and practices to improve the educational experiences for these students.

Creating the space for brave conversations

The REACH Network (Racial Equity for Adult Credentials in Higher Education) grant, funded by the Lumina Foundation created opportunities for community college leaders to have discussions and reflections about the challenges Texas community colleges faced during the pandemic⁴. Specifically, as an ECC (Equity Champion Consultant) collaborative efforts focused on the role of board of trustee members and central administration leaders who shape how their institution improves their strategies to address the declines in racial/ethnic minoritized student groups' enrollment and completion rates. Through an ongoing series of professional development events (i.e., Board of Trustees Institute, or BOTI), the Texas Success Center, a subsidiary of the Texas Association of Community Colleges, invited institutional delegations to have strategic conversations with coaching advisors and to learn from equity-centered educational scholars about these pressing issues.

As the ECC for the Texas Success Center, it was imperative that we created a space for these leaders to have brave and timely conversations about the ongoing challenges that racial/ethnic minoritized student groups face during the pandemic. The initial conversations required these leaders to:

1. **Develop a level-setting perspective** about the changing demographic profile of the Texas student population. It was important that the state data revealed the impending and unavoidable shifts in the racial/ethnic student population.
2. **Acknowledge their potential "blind spots"** about the complexity of these issues to address the needs of racial/ethnic minoritized student groups.
3. **Accept that core ideals** of student demographic diversity, institutional inclusive practices,

³The term racial/ethnic minoritized student group is a widely adopted research term to indicate a group of students in higher education institutions that have endured a history of inequitable educational experiences and outcomes.

⁴ In 2021, the Lumina Foundation provided funding to OCCRL and ESG to support a new network of community college leaders in six states focused on racial inequality through the REACH Collaborative. In Texas, the Texas Success Center has embedded this effort through the Texas Pathways strategy.

educational equity, educational justice, and racial/ethnic minoritized students' sense of belonging must be the guiding forces for institutional change.

4. **Recognize that the conversations and efforts** to improve how their institutions serve racial/ethnic minoritized student groups require an adaptive and ongoing process and not an end point.

The amalgamation of these key tenets created the planning space to have brave discussions around how their institutions will evolve to create an innovative approach to their policies, programs, and practices. In brief, while the pandemic was a dramatic moment in our collective experiences, it also created an important opportunity to discover and disrupt how these leaders lead their institutions.

Leveraging student data for reflections on organizational change

While it was critical to help these educational leaders understand key DEI concepts⁵ during these BOTI events, we determined that how they understand, use, and leverage their empirical institutional student level data on racial/ethnic minoritized student groups was paramount to justify the need for creating an equity-minded approach to reframe how their institutions improve their academic outcomes and their campus engagement needs (Stewart, 2013). We engaged with these leaders to show how they can leverage institutional data to create and implement an equity-minded agenda. Specifically, we emphasized the value and importance of the use of disaggregated data (Davis, et al., 2022). The discussion required these leaders to push on key points:

1. The use of disaggregated data allows institutions to understand the educational outcomes of racial/ethnic minoritized student groups through an intersectional identity approach (Harris & Patton, 2019). For example, we need to understand these students and by race, gender, or individual socio-economic status.
2. The value of disaggregated data permits for critical conversations between leadership and **academic faculty about nuanced differences in academic metrics**. That is, the discussion of program pathway completion rates by different racial/ethnic minoritized student groups.
3. The importance of disaggregated data helps institutional leaders to **understand racial/ethnic minoritized student groups beyond a singular monolithic concept**. Thus, it would require reframing the narrative about universal approach to help all students, which assumes what we do for returning adult racial/ethnic minoritized students, would also help first-time in college students. We strongly encourage institutional leaders to share disaggregated student level data so that faculty members and professional support staff members can implement specific equity-minded organizational policies, programs, and practices to improve disparities in education outcomes.

⁵ Educational researchers have used the term DEI to describe how educational leaders understand the definitions of student diversity by visible and invisible identity-based traits, equity ideals that promotes institutions create the ideal conditions for racial/ethnic minoritized student groups to reach their full potential, and inclusion practices which helps racial/ethnic minoritized student groups to feel a sense of belonging and engagement to the community college campus.



An essential aspect of this research work required that institutional presidents, board members, and shareholders envisioned this equity agenda as a collaborative initiative.

Incremental steps to organizational planning

Coupled with brave conversations and effective uses of institutional data, we recognized discussions may have created apprehension or uncertainty among board of trustee members on how to develop an equity-minded agenda. It is important to note that the audience of board of trustee members may include local community leaders and non-academic administrators who may lack an understanding of key DEI concepts (Morgan et al., 2022). For example, board of trustee members may have lacked some insights or awareness about the disparities in educational outcomes for racial/ethnic minoritized student groups. Nonetheless, we recognize that organizational change must include a diverse group of leaders to advance the DEI initiatives for Texas community colleges. Towards that goal, we developed a hybrid approach to create a catalyst for change. At the state level, we used the pandemic student data to create a drastic sense of urgency that the status quo for institutional action is no longer viable. At the institutional level, we encouraged these leaders to embrace an incremental yet measurable organizational change approach to develop equity-minded initiatives. As a result, our discussions required these leaders to learn these key points:

1. **Board of trustee members need to adopt a long-term strategic plan** on how they plan to implement an equity-minded approach using data on racial/ethnic minoritized student groups as key benchmarks. For example, to reverse the double-digit enrollment rate declines in African American male students, these leaders need to identify incremental improvements in specific high-value academic programs with the largest equity gaps in completion as a beginning point.
2. **Board of trustee members should develop a supportive space that empowers** the community college leadership to embrace and promote an equity-minded agenda. Simply stated, they should publicly endorse and support the incremental changes that advance this agenda.
3. **Board of trustee members should embrace a courageous leadership mindset** to disrupt institutional complacency about creating an equity minded agenda. Our professional development sessions gave the board members a sense of responsibility that they should also advance this work.

We leveraged these professional development sessions to educate, engage, and empower board of trustee members to make a commitment to organizational change through incremental steps. This approach allowed these leaders to feel that they co-constructed the value and importance of developing an equity-minded agenda without any sense of guilt or pressure. We have found that this approach has been constructive and effective with leaders with diverse educational backgrounds.

Creating collaborative engagement to advance the equity-minded agenda

An essential aspect of this research work required that institutional presidents, board members, and shareholders envisioned this equity agenda as a collaborative initiative. Public policy scholars highlight the importance of advancing an institutional agenda that requires a sense of collaborative governance (Gash, 2022). For example, we implored that board of trustee members and community college presidents should value and seek collaborative discussions and engagements with racial/ethnic minoritized students, academic faculty members, professional student services staff members, local community leaders and businesses, and local families and affiliated social organizations (e.g., religious and non-profits) to advance an equity-minded agenda. Towards that goal, our discussions required these leaders to:

1. Adopt an equity-minded agenda that **embraces a commitment to using an asset-based narrative** that places the onus on community colleges to become proactive and better attuned to being a community college that is ready to meet the needs of racial/ethnic minoritized student groups.
2. Understand that institutional commitment to DEI ideals requires a **pledge to strategies that ensure sustainable and long-term investment** in promoting this equity-minded agenda. For example, this suggests that community college leaders understand that racial/ethnic minoritized student groups recognize the community college's commitment to hiring a racially and ethnically diverse faculty and professional staff.
3. Recognize that scaling this equity-minded work **necessitates a commitment beyond the office or officer of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to advance this equity-minded agenda**. For instance, this implies that the board of trustee members adopt incentives (e.g., financial, or tangible resources) for academic faculty members, administrators, and professional staff who conduct work that advances this equity-minded agenda. We believe this type of commitment increases scale and sustainability.

We surmise that board of trustee members who embrace a forward-thinking collaborative engagement approach seek to ensure that community colleges embrace and advance how they revise their institutional policies, programs, and practices to sustain an equity-minded agenda. While we recognize this is a vital element to advance this research work, this is the most difficult aspect of organizational change because of the challenges of a polemic political climate (Williams, et al., 2021), scarcity of resources (Salmi, 2021), and growing distrust in public higher education (Schouten, 2021). We contend that the educational success of racial/ethnic minoritized student groups requires that board of trustee members embrace, promote, and sustain this equity-minded agenda for their community colleges.

Looking forward with an equity-minded leadership approach

There are important lessons that emerged from this collaborative work between the ECC and the Texas Success Center. First, this innovative partnership underscores the value of translating educational research for board of trustee members to create effective organizational changes to adopt an equity-minded agenda. Next, this work emphasizes the importance of being purposeful and intentional about how educational scholars and practitioners engage with diverse shareholders in meaningful and strategic conversations about creating an equity-minded agenda. We have found that these interactions often required leaders to continue a self-reflection journey and to invest in a commitment to advance this important educational agenda.

Finally, looking forward to the next iteration of this collaborative work, we understand that community college leaders will continue to seek answers to exceedingly tough questions with hopes to improve the lives and educational outcomes of racial/ethnic minoritized student groups. Towards that end, it compels education scholars to continue to advance the ideals of educational diversity, equity, and inclusion, to translate their scholarship to make it more accessible for community college board of trustee members and institutional presidents, and to partner with these senior leaders to create and sustain an equity-minded agenda for racial/ethnic minoritized student groups.

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