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Guided Pathways and Student Engagement: Student Centeredness as Equity in Practice

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Student-centeredness as equity in practice is an opportunity. Most of us desire equity to be more than a word that people say in passing; we want equity to be something that we practice with measurable outcomes as we close achievement gaps. The idea of student-centeredness as equity in practice means that focusing on students—all students—can infuse equitable practices into institutions if faculty are strategic and intentional. This goal is accomplished through student engagement, which is key to community colleges successfully implementing guided pathways.

According to the Research and Planning Group's Student Support (Re)defined research project (2013), student engagement is defined as "students actively participating in class and extra-curricular activities." Phil Schlecty (1994) found that students who are engaged exhibit the following characteristics: "(1) they are attracted to their work, (2) they persist in their work despite challenges and obstacles, and (3) they take visible delight in accomplishing their work." A student-centered institution places student learning, development, and transformation at its core. "The term student-centered learning refers to a wide variety of educational programs, learning experiences, instructional approaches and academic support strategies that are intended to address the distinct learning needs, interests, aspirations, or cultural backgrounds of individual students and groups of students" (Student Centered Learning, 2014). Studentcenteredness and student engagement have become hot topics in higher education in general and have become central topics in California community colleges in particular. The challenge of focusing on equity and closing important educational gaps when colleges are not student-centered has found its way to the heart of many of faculty discussions. Currently, however, nearly every California community college is tapping into the reservoir of innovative ideas that comes from recentering student perspectives, experiences, goals, and challenges and their contributions to the educational mission, objectives, and student success.

Guided pathways as a broad completion framework holds as a central tenet that student engagement is critical to the implementation of its four pillars. In order to create pathways, get and keep students on those pathways, and ensure that students are having a highquality learning experience on the pathways, colleges are charged with centralizing student engagement to ensure that the student voice is heard. A college community can only benefit by not assuming knowledge about diverse students' goals, challenges, and needs and the complex ways that each generation experiences an institution as outsiders—incoming students—compared to insiders, or employees. Thus, the guided pathways framework actually opens up a very critical window of opportunity for colleges to integrate and align

important tasks on their campuses. Using student engagement as a powerful tool could help faculty tackle two central issues their campuses are facing in today's educational climate: closing equity gaps for disproportionality impacted students and better understanding diverse student experiences as colleges make important decisions, plan, and implement campus practices. Embedded in student engagement is the broad opportunity to be inclusive and supportive of a wide variety of student experiences, which could facilitate closing equity gaps. In addition, student-centeredness is inherent in student engagement, and if colleges are intentional about making student engagement activities meaningful, they can begin a continuous shift towards student-centeredness which not only provides a constant mental image of students' needs as faculty do their daily duties but places empowered students in the seats next to the faculty so that they are active leaders in their own education.

Equity has been the focus for colleges and the community college system for some time now, yet operationalizing equity in ways that can align changes in processes and programming with measurable outcomes takes considerable time. The goal of colleges is to provide equitable instruction and services to produce equitable outcomes. In attempting to achieve equity, activities such as diversity conferences, multiculturalism, food pantries, ally training, and implicit bias training have been useful as campuses have striven to improve their climates and support for disproportionately impacted students. However, these activities can easily become a list of "equity things to do" that has been checked off, which means that some may think they are all that is needed. A college cannot achieve equity unless the college can experience a cultural shift that includes cultivating an equity mindset. Students must feel valued by faculty who actively inspire them to engage inside and outside of class and to develop the knowledge and skills they need to be successful as they actively participate.

Student engagement gives colleges a unique way to be more equity-minded on a deeper level by being inclusive of diverse student populations in initiatives like guided pathways, AB 705 implementation, shared governance committees, task forces, ad hoc groups, design teams and advisory groups. Examples of students from diverse backgrounds include, but are not limited to, the following: major or course of study, CTE students, Adult Education and non-credit students, international students, working students, out-of-state or out-of-area students, under 18 students, homeless students, racial and ethnic minority students, the LBGTQIA+ community, transitional-age foster youth, veterans, low-income students, disabled students, undocumented students, student with families, formerly incarcerated students, online students, older students, night students, weekend students, athletes, students with wellness, family, health, housing instability, full-time students, part-time students, and life-long learners. Most faculty can rarely say that they sit in committee meetings thinking about how their decisions will impact the educational lives of many of these student categories. Doing the important work of guided pathways has brought clarity about the responsibility to center faculty's work in the unique student populations they serve when decisions are made by committees or academic senates regarding developing programs or initiating long-term changes.

Having students engaged in the process is vital. When students from various backgrounds have a seat at the table, they are experts in their own experience and will remind others to consider how decisions, ideas, and budgets impact their education. By being at the table with the power of being part of the decision-making process, students do not only rely on reminding, asking, or pleading with colleges to do the right thing, but they are empowered to be part of doing the right thing. While some may feel that such engagement is the purpose of student government, as with everything in a society that struggles with equality and equity, associated student organizations typically attract certain types of students and do not always include a full range of diversity. Several colleges have discovered different ways to engage diverse students in their guided pathways work, which has impacted the colleges' equity work as well.

One college created a transformation team for guided pathways to engage the entire campus. While the team included student government, it separately included diverse students at large and conducted several activities with team members pretending to be students themselves in order to learn what helps and hurts students. Another college chose to create a peer-led coaching model for helping with student support where the institution hired and trained diverse students to be peer coaches. The college found that students were better at getting students to use student support services, but it also found that the training for the peer coaches themselves was life-changing, built confidence, and actually helped them focus on their careers and academics.

To implement guided pathways effectively, student equity and institutional equity are imperative because colleges are presented with important considerations such as how raising the completion rates of all students addresses disparities, how the college can address

the challenges of disproportionately impacted students to succeed in courses and programs, and how high expectations can be maintained and coupled with high support both academically and socially. Having diverse students engaged and involved to help answer these questions helps close institutional equity gaps and improves student performances and success.

At the 2019 ASCCC Academic Academy, a student attendee spoke to a group of faculty about her aspirations, experiences, favorites instructors, best classes, biggest challenges, hopes and dreams. Her comments were inspiring because she represented the true reason for equity work. The exuberance of students as they discuss open educational resources and access would be a welcomed breath of fresh air on every campus. Many of faculty have experienced this connection as they have answered the call of guided pathways student engagement. Students are integral parts of design teams and have sorted programs, visited neighboring colleges with faculty, tested Star Fish and Career Coach, and co-facilitated workshops on FLEX days.

Guided pathways has opened the doors for colleges to actively listen to what students have to say and use the information to redesign processes so that students have the best onboarding, intervention, and learning experiences possible. For example, one college decided to create a student advisory squad with diverse students working with campus leadership on guided pathways. The institution hired nearly twenty students to attend guided pathways meetings to help make decisions, but the student advisory squad also held its own student meetings to discuss guided pathways. Another college embedded student engagement in classroom assignments. For a sociology of education assignment, 55 students researched guided pathways and student engagement and made recommendations to the campus Guided Pathways Task Force as their research paper for the semester. Many colleges have allowed students to determine what their pathways or metamajors would include and be called and what the symbol on the website would look like. One college was set on what it would call its pathways, but the students disagreed. That college changed course and went with the students' decision because it realized that the decision impacted the students and was for the students' education.

Student-centeredness is not difficult when one thinks of it as inclusiveness. If students are included, they will speak for themselves. However, substantial incentives will be necessary to get and keep students engaged. Almost every college that has been successful with student engagement has paid student workers or embedded activities in the classroom as part of its courses.

The ultimate goal of guided pathways is that students complete their educational goals. Student engagement presents colleges with a special opportunity to practice equity and focus on students, which subsequently empowers students to actively and intentionally participate in their own education.

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