LEADING WITH CULTURAL RELEVANCE: A QUALITATIVE CROSS-CASE STUDY OF THREE COMMUNITY COLLEGES THAT NARROWED THE EQUITY GAP BETWEEN WHITE AND BLACK STUDENTS IN FIRST-TO-SECOND-YEAR RETENTION OUTCOMES

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ABSTRACT

NATASHA PETERS LIPSCOMB. Leading with Cultural Relevance: A Qualitative Cross-Case Study of Three Community Colleges that Narrowed the Equity Gap Between White and Black Students in First-to-Second Year Retention Outcomes.
(Under the direction of DR. CHANCE W. LEWIS)

Racially minoritized students (RMS) face substantial disparities in college persistence and completion rates (Museus & Saelua, 2017). In particular, Black student enrollment at public two-year or community colleges has declined significantly, dipping below 13% in 2020, while for-profit institutions have maintained enrollment of Black students at roughly 28% over a 10-year period (AACC, 2023). Because community colleges have a reputation for being low-cost, high-quality institutions with more than 60 % of its graduates free of student loan debt (AACC, 2019), proper attention must be given and action taken to identify and address the needs of RMS in the community college settings to increase persistence and graduation rates. Sociological research on community colleges highlights the stratified tension between the increased provision of access as open-door institutions against low rates of successful completion (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2014). While culturally relevant education practices have been most successfully implemented in the K-12 space (Ladson-Billings, 1995), an amplified call goes out to responsible community college leaders for the creation of culturally relevant campus environments. Using the culturally relevant leadership practices framework (Jones et al., 2016), this cross-case study explores the roles and practices of presidents and executive leaders within the context of their community colleges to determine how they create spaces for Black student achievement.

Keywords: Community college leadership, culturally relevant leadership, Black student success

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to those I am called to serve. Some I have been acquainted with, and some I am still waiting to meet. Every soul-searching moment of this process will have been worth it as I witness your greatness. I dedicate this work to the culturally relevant leaders of the future. Lead and lead well! Do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Although branded from the 1950s as "democracy colleges" (Diekhoff, 1950), America's community colleges are at risk of being labeled as social stratifiers within the higher education system, enrolling more historically racially minoritized students (RMS) than ever with less successful outcomes (American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), 2023; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2014). While receiving accolades from policymakers for their "open door" mission, community colleges have simultaneously been criticized and accused of participating in the socialized plan to perpetuate inequalities in economic and social mobility (Freire, 1970/2017; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2014). Because race is a social construct and a manmade concept embedded within our education system, social scientists and critical education theorists alike grapple with the question as to how schooling and formal higher education can be both a mitigating factor as well as a producer of social and economic inequities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; DuBois,1903/1994; Morrison, 2006; Kendall, 2013).

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2022), "As the U.S. labor market continues to recover from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, one constant remains: education boosts earnings and reduces unemployment" (n.p.). When segmented by education attainment level, workers aged 25 and over who have at least an associate degree had a weekly median earning of $963, while those with less than a high school diploma had the lowest median weekly earnings ($626) and the highest unemployment rate among all education levels of 8.3 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). By these measures, higher education pays. However, as the labor market continues to rebound from the recession caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment rates were higher than the national average of 5.3 percent for Blacks across various education levels at 8.6 percent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023).

Among the bleak and disparaging times of dual crises, a global health crisis and an economic crisis, there was evidence of movement toward equity in the labor force with those who have earned at least a high school diploma. More than 90% of working adults in the United States (25 years or older) have earned a high school diploma across groups racially categorized as White, Black, and Asian, with 67% of Hispanics in the workforce having a high school diploma or equivalent (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Still seen as a mitigating factor of social and economic inequities, the culture of higher education encourages continuous lifelong learning beyond high school. Due to systemic disconnections and misalignments within and between the K-12 and higher education spaces, colleges and university leaders must re-examine practices that are mission-focused and equity-driven to avoid reproducing the social and economic inequities of the past, as evidenced in decreased student success outcomes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Eddy et al., 2023; Neal & Colvin, 2020; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2014).

Although a postsecondary credential is becoming an expectation in demonstrating the skills for the future workforce, college student completion outcomes are less than desirable. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 37% of students who aspire to earn a bachelor's degree at a public four-year institution fail to graduate, and 71% who aspired to earn a credential or an associate degree at a public two-year college do not complete (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Even with the doors to community colleges wide-open, having no meritocratic selection criteria for admission, leaders have a responsibility to ensure the efficacy of what is inside once students walk through the open doors of admission. Access does not automatically equal success. The Apostle Paul, one of the greatest leaders in the Bible charged with creating equitable access to the Christian faith, said in 1 Corinthians 16:9, "For a great door and effectual is opened unto me, and there are many adversaries" (King James Bible,

1769/2023). Like Paul (King James Bible, 1769/2023), great opposition and barriers have come against community college leaders and the minoritized students they serve as they seek to advance racial equity and social justice at these open-door institutions (Mungai, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

While community colleges as open-door institutions enroll high rates of historically RMS, addressing open access, retention and completion rates are not equal to their white counterparts (AACC, 2023). According to the NCES, 71% of students who enrolled in one of the nation's community colleges (936 public, 35 tribal, and 72 independent) with the goal of earning a credential or an associate degree did not complete (AACC, 2023; NCES, 2022). Further, the data are more concerning when it comes to students from racially minoritized backgrounds, who make up nearly 50% of total community college enrollment (AACC, 2023; Neal & Colvin, 2020). Community colleges have been part of the nation's formula to raise educational attainment levels, with the ultimate goal of addressing issues of economic and social mobility through workforce opportunities. However, with great turnover in executive leadership roles in the past two decades, today's community college leaders must maintain a delicate balancing act that honors the past while innovatively shaping these institutions into the full maturity of serving a diverse cultural student population (Eddy et al., 2023).

Adding to the dilemma, in light of the current state of the misaligned mission and outcomes, the community college forecast includes pending retirements, the lack of formal succession planning, and the absence of formal leadership training in anti-racism and cultural relevance (Eddy et al., 2023; Flynn et al., 2017; Hotchkins et al., 2022). According to Eddy et al. (2023),

Community colleges have been undergoing great turnover in leadership positions over

the past two decades as leaders retire, creating opportunities for shifts and innovation in

leadership approaches…despite the inclusive mission of community colleges, operations

are solidly bureaucratic. This orientation relies on hierarchies and positional leadership,

which can make the institutions less nimble and create challenges for leaders (p.31).

A collaborative, other-focused leadership approach (Eddy et al., 2023) creates a more inclusive

campus community, as captured by Hotchkins et al. (2022) in *The Coalition of the Willing*. Both

Eddy et al. (2023) and Hotchkins et al. (2022) highlighted the influence of community college

presidents' identities on their decision-making with campus stakeholders.

Under the notion that "how" we teach (pedagogy) in culturally diverse classrooms

impacts student learning outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 1995), I purport that "how" we lead in

culturally diverse community college spaces impacts student retention and completion outcomes.

This research study uses a culturally relevant leadership framework (Jones et al., 2016; Ladson-

Billings, 1995) alongside a transparent guide to addressing equity gaps in education (Ziegler et

al., 2021) to explore how community college presidents and executive leaders implement

diversity and equity initiatives, narrowing student success gaps between RMS and their white

counterparts.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the roles and leadership practices of the

president and other executive leaders in three community colleges that successfully narrowed an

equity gap and produced successful outcomes in first to second-year student retention over a

five-year period. Unlike other higher education institutions, community colleges boast as the best

investment for state and local governments, educating a workforce of citizenry that learns local

and earns local, rarely leaving the region in which they attend a community college. Whether rural or urban, community colleges are agile in responding to the workforce needs through non-credit short-term training certifications and college credit-bearing courses. In addition to a mission this large, community colleges are charged with serving a large, diverse population of learners. Today's community college mission is intact, yet requires a unique set of skills for faculty, staff, and executive leadership (Flynn et al., 2017), recognizing that "inequities in treatment, outcomes, funding, and support of students of color in general has been found repeatedly in studies of community colleges" (Hotchkins et al., 2022, p. 416).

Research Questions

To explore the roles and practices of community college executive leaders, three main questions closely guided the research.

RQ1- How do community college executive leaders use their influence to identify and address barriers for Black students?

RQ2- How does the institutional context and culture shape each community college's strategies and outcomes?

RQ3- What are the key commonalities and differences across the institutions?

Theoretical Frameworks

While the community college mission is grounded in workforce and economic development, it is important to not only see the functional role of community colleges as economic engines but to acknowledge the sociological contributions these great institutions make. DeMarrais and LeCompte (1999) in their explanation of the purpose of schooling and higher education, draw attention over many years to a functional theoretical link between the economics of our society and schools and colleges.

Schooling serves two major economic purposes: (1) To prepare students for later work roles, and (2) To select and train the labor force. Functionalists believe that schools prepare students for the workforce in part by teaching attitudes, technical skills, and social behavior appropriate to the workplace, such as cooperation, conformity to authority, punctuality, gender-appropriate attitudes, neatness, task orientation, care of property; and allegiance to the team. (DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1999, p. 9; Lattimore et al., 2012; Lemert, 2018)

This study is positioned in Foucault's (1980) post-structural, postmodern social theoretical construct of [bio]power, highlighting the existence of, while seeking to challenge dominant discourses and power structures in higher education that are often seen as hindrances and disruptors in systems of oppression, rather than encouraging the development of more inclusive and equitable practices (Cisney & Morar, 2015). According to Woolsey and Narruhn (2018), Biopower theory provides a lens to view the intersection of structural factors like racism, and poverty. This study is grounded in the theoretical lens of Biopower (Foucault, 1980), seeking to understand the power structures that exist in the community college setting and the roles community college leaders play in reshaping societal norms and values, particularly around issues of inequity (Lemert, 2018).

To further clarify the notion of challenging dominant discourses (Cisney & Morar, 2015), we must come to expect that wherever dominance and power exist, there is the protection of knowledge to maintain that dominance. Along these same lines, where there is power, there is the likelihood of resistance to equity. Foucault's theory of power (1980) reminds us that leadership, as a relational structure of power, is not fixed but a dynamic social network. Although the individual or group who seeks to dominate wants their position never to be

contested, social discourse exposes inequities and allows for solution-based action (Cisney & Morar, 2015; Lemert, 2018).

Discourse and the analysis of power relations are instruments of change, particularly in the field of urban higher education. While Foucault (1980) is given credence for asserting that power is knowledge, theorists such as Habermas came alongside to emphasize that real knowledge can only be gained through open and welcomed dialogue. (Cisney & Morar, 2015; DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1999). The role of community college leaders, then, is to create spaces of social networks and open dialogue and to fill the content of those discussions with true and transparent knowledge as a collective resource. Although unable to ever separate today's discourse and knowledge from the effects of history or from personal beliefs and values, according to Foucault, in a collection highlighting his former work on *Discourse of Language* (1994), leaders must be courageous in the face of public cultural and political fear or intimidation that without organizational support, often leads to social sanctioning as seen in recent legislation in States like North Carolina (Cisney & Morar, 2015; Henig et al., 2001; Lemert, 2018; Mungai, 2023; Woolsey & Narruhn, 2018).

Community colleges are educational government agencies, and as seen through the lens of Foucault,

> the language of 'governmentality'...the general problem arises in a multitude of forms. (1) the government of oneself, in the form of a return to an emphasis on Stoic thought; (2) the government of souls and human conduct, in the form of pastoral power; (3) the government of children [students], apparent by an explosion of texts centered on pedagogical strategies; and finally, (4) the government of the state. (Cisney & Morar, 2015, p. 13).

Highlighting the tenets of Foucault's biopower theory and elements of discourse leading to narrative and structural humility (Cisney & Morar, 2015; Lemert, 2018), this study seeks to determine the socio-cultural forms of motivation that are inherent within practices of community college executive leaders on campuses where there is evidence of more equitable student success outcomes. In addition to practices shared by leaders, an analysis of policy and other documents lends itself to Foucault's discourse analysis, as demonstrated in other education studies. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

> is particularly appropriate for critical policy analysis because it allows a detailed investigation of the relationship between language to other social processes and of how language works within power relations. CDA provides a framework for a systematic analysis- researchers can go beyond speculation and demonstrate how policy texts work. (Taylor, 2004, p. 436)

While Foucault's Biopower theory began with a focus on sexuality and gender, by the twentieth century, it evolved to acknowledge the "war that is going on beneath order and peace, the war that undermines our society and divides it in a binary mode is, basically, a race war" (Cisney & Morar, 2015, p. 15). Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and, hence, Culturally Relevant Leadership (CRL) (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Jones et al., 2016) speaks to the "how" of this relationship and the power dynamics that exist when it comes to the cultural experiences and knowledge shared in education settings. It is important to use a culturally relevant framework for this study to address issues that community college leaders may face in establishing and driving equity initiatives.

Culturally relevant leadership, as a conceptual framework compliments the theoretical underpinnings of Foucault's Biopower theory as it serves to consider, through discourse and

dialogue, the cultural knowledge and experiences of those who hold executive leadership positions and how they approach change in policy and practice to achieve measurable student success outcomes (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Cisney & Morar, 2015; Foucault, 1980; Jones et al., 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Woolsey & Narruhn, 2018). The Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning Model outlines five domains for leadership engagement: (1) acknowledging and modifying historical patterns of inclusion and exclusion; (2) increasing the representation of culturally diverse students' ideas, opinions, and perspectives; (3) cognitive and personal growth; (4) the quantity and quality of interactions; and (5) the structures and processes that routinely affect the students' experiences (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Chunoo & Callahan, 2017; Jones et al., 2016; Mahoney, 2017; Owen et al., 2017).

Significance of the Study

When our nation is in a cycle of economic recovery, community colleges are often part of the solution to address workforce needs by training and retraining in local, national, and global contexts (Lattimore et al., 2012). Giving a historic account of this mission in action, the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) is the nation's credible source for tracking the progress of this aim. According to the AACC (2023), community college enrollments increased rapidly during the first ten years of the twenty-first century, showing the most gains during times of economic recession, with its highest peak of national enrollment in 2010. In 2014, the demographic of enrolled students began to shift, and white students were no longer the majority of students enrolled in community colleges. In 2017, just two years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a decline of over one million students nationwide, resulting in a 14% decrease in community college enrollment. Even more pressing than patterns of enrollment decline is the light shown upon who is enrolling in today's community colleges and

the challenge of Black students persisting to completion, having earned a valuable credential. Most recent data show that 30% of community college students are the first in their families to attend college, and 51% are categorized from historically racially minoritized backgrounds (AACC, 2023).

This study is significant because it addresses not only the expectations of higher education's accountability to equitable student success outcomes (Lattimore et al., 2012) but also the perspectives of those who lead these diverse and dynamic institutions. Recent scholarship on equitable student success outcomes incorporates faculty pedagogical and campus engagement concepts, falling short of addressing the professional development needs of executive leaders to move the needle (California Community Colleges Academic Senate, 2020; Doran, 2021; Flynn et al., 2017; Museus & Saelua, 2017; Ray, 2019). In its most recent edition (4th Ed.) of *Competencies for Community College Leaders* (Royal, 2022), The American Association of Community Colleges' Leadership Suite includes specific institutional and cultural awareness competencies and behaviors for leaders in the areas of faculty, entry-level manager, executive, and chief executive officers, asserting that

> colleges must also understand what it means to be an institution that values diversity, equity, and inclusion, and how to put those beliefs into action…community colleges, and by extension, their employees, must work to eliminate visible and invisible barriers to student's educational journey, which includes policies and processes that disproportionately negatively impact black, Latina/o/x, Indigenous and other students whose communities are marginalized, excluded, discriminated against, and minoritized by the status quo. (Royal, 2022, p. 8)

This study is also significant because it will present a scholarly contribution from an asset lens, an opportunity to amplify the voices, perspectives, and practices of presidents and executive leaders at community colleges where data represent the successful outcomes of Black students.

Positionality of the Researcher

In preparation for this research, I read qualitative case studies and concentrated on the role of the researcher. Qualitative research allows me to be involved as a researcher and to view myself and my own experiences as an RMS within higher education and now an executive leader in a community college as an asset to the research. My personal histories, as well as my professional experiences, are an important contribution. As a Black female, first-generation, low-income undergraduate student, I attended a Historically Black College University (HBCU) in a rural town about two and a half hours away from the urban city where I grew up. I relied heavily upon high school counselors and college leaders in the HBCU setting to make the successful transition to college, through to completion, and into my chosen career field. At the end of my first year of college, I was faced with the decision, due to an unplanned pregnancy, to either drop out of college or persist. In part, due to the relationships with my college professors, advisors, executive leaders, and peer relationships within student organizations, I felt supported enough to continue. I not only graduated with my bachelor's degree but on time and with high honors.

At the time this study is conducted, I am serving as Vice President of Student Success Services at a community college. My students represent a large, diverse population of students (age, culture, race, income, etc.) working part-time jobs, having dependent children, or primarily being responsible for caregiving of family members. I am passionate about creating a campus environment of support that my students need to be successful. Having served on several national and statewide community college advisory committees and in leading community

boards, proper attention and investment must be made toward structural systems aimed at addressing the needs of underserved students. While grant funding, programmatic efforts, curriculum development, and professional development are important aspects of the work I do, I find that the people who lead these complex organizations, their expectation of everyday processes to identify and remove barriers, and their focus on policy are more important than ever before in leading equitable higher education learning environments. In pivotal times and critical moments, when decisions have to be made by college students to either drop out, stop out, or persist; they often move toward the help of trusted people, in welcoming places, or in the absence of these, turn again to what they once knew as acceptance. As executive leaders of community colleges, we must create and foster environments full of people who know and love the strengths of our students and expect, without excuse, the success of all students.

While I attribute much of my success as a college student to relationships with professional educators and leaders, I am open-minded about the alternative perspectives and views of lawmakers and other professionals toward cultural relevance as well as the importance of personal motivations of students who enroll in community college. Perhaps successful students who do not have close ties to campus leaders have other kinds of cultural and community wealth outside of the college environment. As a researcher and senior level college administrator, I am committed to the rigor and internal credibility of the research process to bring about a deeper understanding and more objective view of the role of community college executive leaders in producing equitable outcomes within the community college culture. With this in mind, I approached the research with few assumptions and an openness to studying the many constructs that are created by today's social political climate and leadership dynamics.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this research, specific definitions are used to refer to various concepts and practices:

Culturally relevant practices: the degree to which participants have opportunities to exchange knowledge about their own culture (beliefs, values, and experiences) as an asset to the environment (Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Museus & Saelua, 2017).

Deficit Thinking: When educators and or administrators assume that students are inferior based on their cultural, linguistic or experiential backgrounds. This deficit thinking blames the underachievement of ethnic minority groups in schools on perceived deficiencies relating to minority students themselves, their families and their cultures (Moore & Lewis, 2012; Morales & Hamann, 2021, p. 4).

Equity gap: commonly understood as being a measured set of disparities between demographic groups in terms of educational outcomes (Ziegler et al., 2021).

Opportunity gap: gap in access to foundational social, economic, and educational resources needed for well-being across the contexts of schools, communities, and society. This extends beyond safe schools, quality teachers, and relevant curricula. It includes but is not limited to: taken-for-granted resources such as quality health-care, food, shelter, and transportation (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Morales & Hamann, 2021)

Racially minoritized students (RMS): non-white students who are ascribed a marginalized identity. Acknowledging that race is a social construct as part of a system of oppression and that the total number of students of color may not be less than the total number of white students, challenging the definition of "minority" (Hallett et al., 2020; Neal & Colvin, 2020).

Community College Student Retention: Year-to-year continuing enrollment. Students who enroll in fall semester courses (PT or FT/not including dual-enrolled high school students) and are continuously enrolled the following fall semester.

Community College Executive: president, chancellor, assistant vice president, associate vice president, vice president, or chief officer (Royal, 2022, p. 9)

Narrative Humility: suggests that executive leaders be aware of their own prejudices, expectations, and frames of listening while acknowledging and engaging with the dynamic nature of students' stories (Woolsey & Narruhn, 2018).

Structural Humility: implies privileging the students' perspective as essential when evaluating, developing and acting on policy and practice solutions (Woolsey & Narruhn, 2018).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of literature provides a critical examination of the existing scholarship

related to community colleges and the use of culturally relevant practices for equitable student

success outcomes. This chapter begins with an overview of challenging perspectives on

community colleges, followed by mission-based solutions for these open door, open access

institutions in meeting the needs of RMS. Next, the literature review focuses on the unique

nature of the community college design as an intended two-year college experience, introducing

The Two-Year Thompson Scholar Learning Community (TSLC) Model for student retention. As

the literature review continues, the need for community college cultural leadership development

is addressed, drawing on the work of seminal scholars in culturally relevant teaching affirming

the need for culturally relevant leadership. Lastly, a scientific approach to understanding

educational equity gaps is offered using *Ziegler's Nine Points Toward More Transparency When*

Addressing Equity Gaps in Education to best understand how leaders should intentionally and

transparently lead with an equity lens. The literature review chapter concludes with a summary

identifying the holes and gaps in the literature regarding the use of culturally relevant leadership

practices by community college executive leaders, specifically highlighting successful outcomes

in equitable student retention. This study will provide insight for future understanding on leading

with cultural relevance in community college spaces for equitable student success outcomes.

Perspectives on Community Colleges

Historically, American community colleges have been viewed as model institutions of

higher education by other countries but fight for credibility at home in the United States.

Examples of this include community colleges being highlighted and modeled in other countries

and used as a vehicle to the baccalaureate degree for international students (Darling-Hammond,

2017; Ghazzawi et al., 2020; Wiggan & Hutchison, 2009). The American government's plans to make community colleges of the future accessible and affordable to every U.S. citizen as part of a P-20 education system should be considered a loose commitment, at best. America has a history of comparing itself to itself and rarely looks outside of the States to make global, comprehensive, and cohesive advances. Almost two decades ago, Wiggan and Hutchison's *Global Issues in Education* (2009) implored leaders to "address multiple educational issues across different peoples" (p. 13). This management of differences, spoke to the need for non-assimilation and the diving into a new way of thinking about and practicing a culture of equity in education that has been long-expected worldwide (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Wang & Seggie, 2012; Wiggan & Hutchison, 2009).

The management of differences in global systems of higher education must be approached thoughtfully and always with consideration of the role of community colleges as agile and credible institutions of higher education. A community college education provides lifelong learning and workforce development skills that are invaluable to economic stability in the context of our local, national, and global societies (Altbach, 2016; Schultz, 2019; Wiggan & Hutchison, 2009). Government and higher education leaders have been compelled for over two decades to bury "the old tension between the academic and vocational missions of the community college…[and]...take on new dimensions" of a forever changing cultural paradigm. According to Zeszotarski (2001), "Globalization challenges community colleges to reassess their dual roles in preparing the workforce" (p. 3).

Into the 21st century, community colleges continue to fight for credibility at home in the United States as model institutions of higher education. With the goal of creating an accessible pipeline between education and a global workforce, many developing countries like Taiwan and

Turkey see the mission of community colleges to be synonymous with democracy (Diekhoff, 1950; Topper & Powers, 2013; Wang & Seggie, 2012). Akin to issues faced by elementary and secondary education in the United States, community colleges across the globe are challenged to align their open-door mission of access with meeting the needs of today's diverse global learner.

Dougherty and Townsend's (2006) contributions to the historical and theoretical perspective on the development and sustainability of the community college mission is a formidable reminder to aspiring and seasoned leaders alike. In the United States, there was an intense focus on workforce and economic development from the 1910s through to the 1960s. This is where we find the popularity of community colleges primarily as adult education or community service agencies. The consideration of the value-add of community colleges to government and to citizens in America really took hold in the 1970s, when the opportunity for expanded higher education towards a bachelor's degree became part of the comprehensive mission, allowing community colleges to confer their own transfer and Baccalaureate degrees (Dougherty & Townsend, 2006; Ghazzawi et al., 2020).

While today the community college is known by citizens for its flexibility and array of educational offerings from dual-enrollment (high school and college credit bearing courses) to lifelong skills-based learning in professions like firefighting and law enforcement, we should not be misguided in the realization that government officials largely shape the focus of community colleges. According to Dougherty and Townsend (2006), "Government officials have supported the workforce and economic development function in part as a means to enhance their own political popularity and electability by promoting economic growth" (p. 8). Although many government officials acknowledge and support the work of the community college on the campaign trail, rarely do they support the agenda to appropriately fund these institutions once

seated in positions of budgetary authority and legislative influence (Mungai, 2023). Reaching

back a decade ago, we capture the scholarly work of Anyon (2014) which discussed ways in

which policies contribute to the poverty that we see in cities, counteracting the efforts made by

education reformers to bring about sustainable change (Payne, 2013; Schultz, 2019). Even

further back, in 2011, 53% of college graduates were unemployed or underemployed (Anyon,

2014, p. 31). Anyon spoke to economic policies and the role of community colleges by

highlighting training and education within communities stating that "macroeconomic policies set

the minimum wage below poverty levels and train inner-city hopefuls for jobs that do not

exist…" (Anyon, 2014, p. 81).

Mission-Based Solutions for Community Colleges

Despite the dichotomous perspectives of education reformers and politicians, within the

past five years scholars and social scientists have reinforced the characterization of community

colleges as "an undeniable force in American higher education…perhaps our nation's most

democratic institutions of higher education based on access and affordability…providing

avenues to higher education for the underrepresented" (D'Amico & Lewis, 2019, p. 176).

D'Amico and Lewis (2019) illustrated the ways in which community colleges can help remedy

the critical issues the nation faces in teacher shortage, diversity of workforce, as well as diversity

in the geographical context (urban and rural). Educational and governmental leaders must

strengthen their recommitment to the evolving mission of community colleges and in doing so,

address a growing and diverse workforce. Through curricular (credit earning) functions,

community colleges meet the needs of the occupational and vocational workforce, equipping

graduates and completers with an associate degree, diploma, or certificate. Through its noncredit

function, community colleges provide short-term certification and customized training for local

businesses-many of which are physically local, but internationally connected to the global economy (D'Amico & Lewis, 2019). We must underscore the importance of open access to all these college programs through funding, equitable policy and practice, and maintaining reasonable commuting distances that have typically been barriers to specific segments of society.

In further highlighting the need for alignment between education and the workforce, D'Amico and Lewis (2019) discussed the broad and purposeful policy movement happening within higher education related to community colleges, identifying several community college policy movements including developmental education, transfer and articulation agreements, performance funding, and free (tuition-waived) community college. These come together around a call for the need to develop equitable pathways. In this comprehensive work, we find the notion of an education continuum where students persist through high school to college and then on to postsecondary graduation. Realistically, and somewhat critically, D'Amico and Lewis (2019) see these pathways as non-linear, but somewhat of a swirl as students enter an institution of higher education, progress, and exit finding themselves entering at another point and repeating the same pattern. The authors suggest that community colleges are the choice of many students at some point in the swirl, indicating that nearly half of all students receiving a baccalaureate degree have attended a community college at some point (D'Amico & Lewis, 2019).

The community college mission has brought about debate among education and state lawmaking officials as to whether they should be comprehensive with multiple missions or more focused on one of two goals: either (1) providing affordable tuition for the first two years toward a bachelor's degree or (2) providing high-quality workforce training (Morales & Hamann, 2021). Today's reality is that America's community colleges have not chosen one or the other but operate in both worlds; choosing to see all learning, technical and academic, as knowledge. As

evidenced by the literature on the higher education system at-large, and community colleges as a strengthening entity of our academic system; today's community colleges are geographically well-positioned (or located) to meet the needs of school districts, local businesses, regional universities, and global workforce partners (Altbach, 2016; D'Amico & Lewis, 2019; Wang & Seggie, 2012; Wiggan & Hutchison, 2009). Leaders of these great institutions of higher education are faced with the challenge of creating a learning community that appropriately supports the success of all students (Mungai, 2023).

Preparing Community Colleges for Racially Minoritized Student (RMS) Success

With such a clear mission and a diversified reach, why do the most vulnerable populations turn to community colleges yet find no large-scale success? Community college open access is not enough. Literature suggests that it must be coupled with intentional designs of support for RMS (Wassmer & Galloway, 2023). Since the early 1800s, models of support for college transition have existed for White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) college students. By the early 1920's, colleges and universities began to expand efforts to help students be more successful on campus, especially after World War II as the demand for higher education increased with an influx of more diverse student populations in terms of social class and status (Lemert, 2018). With factors such as homesickness and higher academic expectations attributing to reasons students were not succeeding in the university setting, the factors that exposed inequities in the higher education system continued to grow through the twenty-first century, including indicators presented through a racially minoritized demographic and geographically diverse context of college students (Hallett et al., 2020; Lattimore et al., 2012).

Hallett's research team found that historically minoritized and marginalized students transitioned to college carrying multi-layered generational issues such as poverty, code

switching, little knowledge of college life, and their cultural assets framed as deficits (Hallett et al., 2020). With college accessibility and affordability becoming more of a national focus, stakeholders and policymakers must understand that access to higher education as well as support programs must become more inclusive and equitable. Community colleges must pay particularly close attention to first generation college students who are from underprivileged backgrounds and may be ascribed a marginalized identity. As students transition to college, they face a plethora of challenges, ranging from financial hardships to social emotional trauma. To better equip students with the skills and resources as they transition from high school to college, Cole et al. (2020) suggested that comprehensive college transition programs help support students as they navigate through the transition to college and through to successful completion.

The Two-Year Thompson Scholar Learning Community (TSLC) Model

Through a collaborative approach with college executive leaders, administrators, and other campus stakeholders, an effective Comprehensive College Transition Program (CCTP) should target student populations who stand to benefit greatly from being immersed in wraparound services. Wraparound transition programs and services aid in the adjustment to the sometimes-harsh realities of college life. Cole et al. (2020) spells out the components of a CCTP which include "faculty related interactions, program activities, and first year seminar…" (p.279). Similar to the CCTP model (Cole et al., 2020) focusing mainly on the high school transition to a university setting, Hallett et al. (2020) offered a comprehensive learning community structure designed for two-year implementation; most aligned with community college curricular program timelines. The Thompson Scholar Learning Community (TSLC) program structure recognizes students as scholars where shared cultural knowledge is an asset. This aligns with the major tenets of Gloria Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant framework (Hallett et al., 2020; Ladson-

Billings, 1995). The two-year learning community model offered by Hallett also acknowledges

college administrators as sources of knowledge and support (Hallett et al., 2020; Jones et al.,

2016).
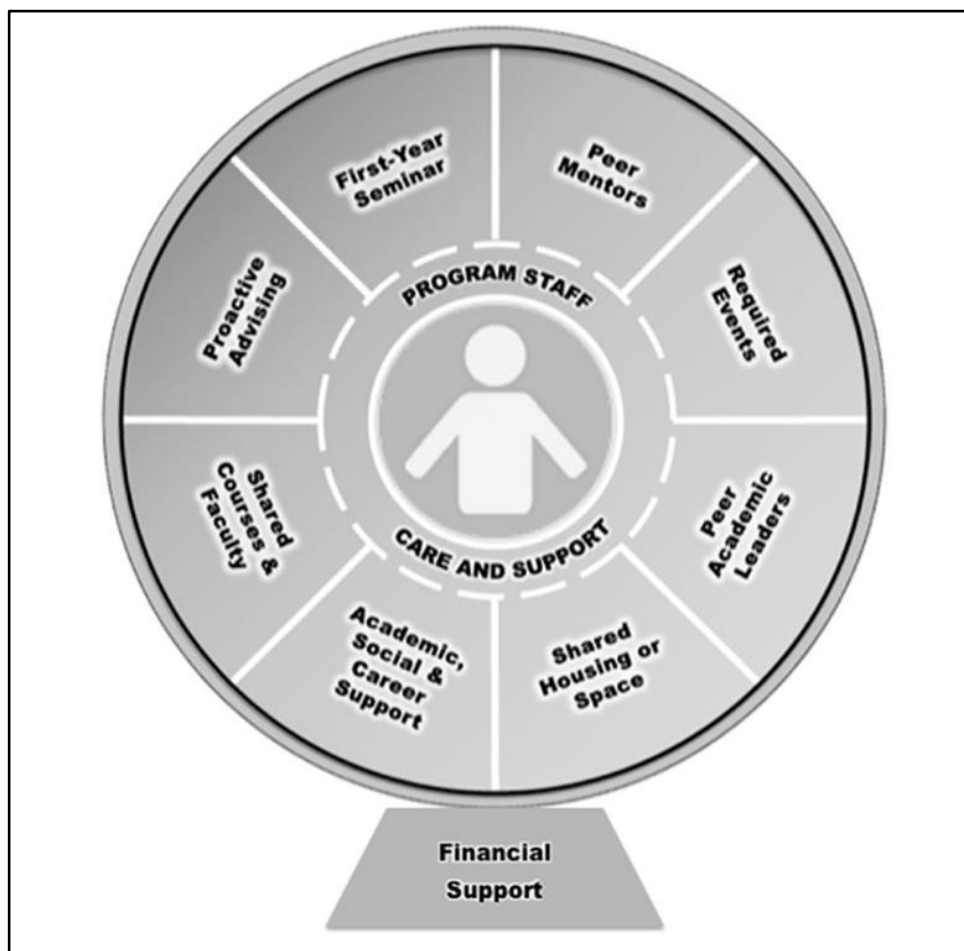
Figure 1: Two-Year Thompson Scholar Learning Community (TSLC) Program Structure

Note. Retrieved from Hallett et al., 2020, p.244

As illustrated by the two-year TSLC program model (Hallett et al., 2020), college

leadership's commitment to financial resources in staff and proactive programming is essential.

Enhancing the research focus on minoritized student populations, Morales and Hamann (2021)

highlighted leadership, policy, and the institution's accountability to be prepared for students at

the forefront, never blaming students for being underprepared to enter urban or rural college

environments (Lattimore et al., 2012; Morales & Hamann, 2021). This is particularly important to note as we continue to search for evidence of successful asset-based approaches to serving RMS in higher education, particularly two-year program designs in community college settings. Much of Morales and Hamann's work (2021) is based out of the State of Indiana, and is relevant in the context of both urban and rural community colleges with a focus on positive outcomes for RMS. The research tool offered by these scholars includes four dimensions of improvement as RMS transition into higher education spaces: 1) *Preparation-* preparing your institution for students of color; 2) *Recruitment-* successfully recruiting and enrolling students of color; 3) *Retention-* creating environments and opportunities for successful retention and graduation; and 4) *Transfer-* additional considerations for supporting transfer student success (Morales & Hamann, 2021). Gonzalez et al. (2021) helped contribute to the calling out of educators' deficit thinking with researched policy analysis demonstrating negative impacts on racially minoritized student success, their families, and their cultures. In harmony, Morales and Hamann (2021) offered this definition of deficit thinking,

> When educators and or administrators assume that some children [students] are inferior or less than based on their cultural, linguistic or experiential backgrounds. This deficit thinking blames the underachievement of ethnic minority groups in schools on perceived deficiencies relating to minority students themselves, their families and their cultures. (p. 4)

With the understanding that community college executive leaders are transparently accountable through student success outcomes with little political or financial support to address this part of the mission (Mungai, 2023), contemporary research on community college practices and minoritized student success has brought about a much-debated question among researchers

and practitioners alike: *What matters for improving the success rates of different cohorts of community college students?* (Wassmer & Galloway, 2023). The community college focused study explores the relationship between institutional leadership-policy driven choices and student characteristics to determine the impact on completion rates.

Using panel-data regression analysis to correlate these variables, Wassmer and Galloway (2023) conducted their research with the California Community College System, deemed by some as the most extensive community college system in the United States. The researchers uncovered what they call "policy-alterable institutional variables" attributing to the success of student cohorts (Wassmer & Galloway, 2023, p. 356). Among these student success, outcome-driven, policy-alterable institutional variables set by college leaders to impact various underrepresented student populations were 1) college leaders prioritizing larger class sizes and fewer credit sections; 2) investing in an academic assistance program for low-income students; and 3) commitment to an increased percentage of full-time faculty (Wassmer & Galloway, 2023). The quantitative research ultimately concluded that "College-specific policies on delivering education can result in disparate impacts on different student cohorts' success rates" (Wassmer & Galloway, 2023, p. 359). Community college leaders must focus on college-specific policies, within their local context and based on the needs of their population of RMS (Guthrie et al., 2017).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogies in Community Colleges

Community colleges have been accused of being both open door access institutions as well as "exclusionary spaces for labor extraction that murders the spirits of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC)" (Wilson, 2021, p. 47). Wilson (2021) explored non culturally responsive practices as "spirit murdering" by use of a case analysis bound in a mid-sized urban

community college in Chicago as the research site. Historical narratives and contemporary stories are used, including students' organized response to a campus incident where during a training, the then police chief urged other officers to hang a Black officer from a tree. The response to this type of violence as described by DuBois in 1903 (DuBois, 1903/1994) is one that parallels harm to the spirit, recognizing that the source of Black people's power is found consistently in the memories of their souls or what some would call their spirits.

Wilson's (2021) work further explores DuBois' (1903/1994) concept of spirit murdering in the community college context and presents a modern-day alternative and intervention to spirit murdering in an effort to build and sustain more liberatory community college spaces. Wilson (2021) focused on community colleges as part of the racism that is permanent in all structures of U.S. society. The examples and narratives of exclusion and extraction are summarized in a list format, giving ready reference to spirit murdering activities across community colleges to include programs with academic program point systems, placement tests, apprenticeship rules for dress and hair, campus signage with implicit messages, rows of desks suggesting emptiness of students who desire to be filled, and academic warning programs that lead to no options for returning. In conclusion, Wilson (2021) gave examples of the current community college landscape led by culturally responsive leaders who are committed to structurally dismantling anti-Black systems. In these spaces, faculty "evoke the hidden curricula that create learning spaces rooted in love, compassion, and the investigation of students' lives, cultures, and communities" (Wilson, 2021, p.59).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogical Practices

Most research on culturally relevant pedagogy and practice has been carried out in K-12 educational settings. The seminal work of Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) gave a foundational

cause for the exploration of the intersection of culture and teaching as a way to understand the exemplary practices of teachers who engage with African American students. Earlier examples of research concepts involving culture addressed teacher education programs at their micro and macro levels, analytically (Shulman, 1987). In an attempt to build on previous works, while pointing out their limitations, Ladson-Billings (1995) said that each of these analytical notions

> suggests that student 'success' is represented in achievement within the current social structures extant in schools. Thus, the goal of education becomes how to 'fit' students constructed as 'other' by virtue of their race/ethnicity, language, or social class into a hierarchical structure that is defined as a meritocracy. (p. 467)

Ladson-Billings' culturally relevant framework argued that previous studies on cultural mismatch give a connotation that students must accommodate or adjust to the mainstream culture (i.e., culturally appropriate, culturally congruent, culturally compatible) rather than places of learning becoming more dynamic and synergistic as culturally responsive (Ladson-Billings, 1995). After observing exemplary teachers of African American students, as community nominated participants (nominated by local mothers of a church), Ladson-Billings' work developed as a grounded theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. Three broad themes emerged: 1) concepts of self and others held by culturally relevant teachers; 2) the manner in which social relations are structured by culturally relevant teachers; and 3) the conceptions of knowledge held by culturally relevant teachers (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 478). This scholarship proves useful in the proposed research context as it pertains to the perceptions of community college presidents and executive leaders as they develop concepts of self, their students, and their approaches to leading community colleges with a culturally relevant lens.

Culturally relevant and responsive practices (CRP) have been interchangeably defined as a "personal and professional developmental process through advocacy for teaching [and leading] to and through cultural diversity to improve the achievement of ethnically diverse students" (Han et al., 2014). The three broad propositions that emerged from CRP research require educators to examine the conceptions of self and others, social relational structures, and conceptions of knowledge (Ladson-Billings, 1995). While the seminal work of Ladson-Billings was centered in the K-12 context, the scholarly contributions of Han et al. (2014) addressed CRP in higher education settings and explains that the "purpose of CRP is to empower linguistically, racially, and ethnically diverse students by cultivating their cultural integrity, individual abilities, and academic success" (p. 291). Being culturally aware in the field of education has been shown to have a positive impact as it relates to college program/major and career choices of minority students, particularly in the fields of science and engineering (Charleston et al., 2014). According to Han et al. (2014), "The use of cultural referents in teaching bridges and explains mainstream culture, while valuing and recognizing students' own cultures" (p. 291). The relationship between college policy and practice and those who implement it plays a role in student success. The incorporation of CRP could bring about a greater connection and understanding of the student's sense of place as leaders transparently address issues of equity in student outcomes.

Culturally Relevant Leadership (CRL) Practices

Hotchkins et al. (2022) explored how racism exists at community colleges and how Black community college presidents disrupt racism on their predominantly white campuses. Through the qualitative research method of semi-structured interviews, six community college presidents (three men and three women) engaged in discourse with researchers. The research yielded three themes highlighting how Black community college presidents lead with cultural relevance. 1)

accountability matters, 2) the need for space creators, and 3) developing student 'critical' mass (Hotchkins et al., 2022). These themes are relevant to this study's exploration of the roles and practices of community college presidents and executive leaders, regardless of their racial identity, in creating and sustaining culturally relevant leadership practices for accountability in producing more equitable student outcomes. The most consistent theme among the presidents in the Hotchkins et al. (2022) study focused on "the need for campus community members to dismantle notions of meritocracy, objectivity, neutrality, and color blindness, which supports the CRT tenet- foregrounds experiential knowledge of people of color and resistance of dominant ideologies" (p. 424).

As depicted by recent research, there is a lack of antiracism training for new community college presidents and likewise, a primed research environment where administrators, faculty, and staff on community college campuses are "ready to lead and be taught about how to further develop anti-racist programs and practices" (California Community Colleges Academic Senate, 2020; Hotchkins et al., 2022, p. 428). This research is useful for the scope of this study centered on power dynamics, identity, capacity, and discourse (Cisney & Morar, 2015) as part of the culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) model (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Jones et al., 2016). Unlike previous research on culturally relevant practices in K-12 spaces, community college teaching, or Black community college presidents (California Community Colleges Academic Senate, 2020; Chunoo & Callahan, 2017; Doran, 2021; Flynn et al., 2017; Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Hotchkins et al., 2022; Ray, 2019; Student Affairs Now Host, 2022), the significance of this study directly involves community college presidents, regardless of racial identity, and their perceived role in creating inclusive spaces that are socially just for racially minoritized student success (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Jones et al., 2016; Owen et al., 2017).

As community college leaders work to "maintain a delicate balancing act that honors past innovations that allowed institutions an opportunity to mature since their founding" (Eddy et al., 2023, p.31), an other-focused leadership style suggests the need to consider cultural relevance as a leadership framework in developing leadership identity and capacity (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Owen et al., 2017) to positively impact change (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017; Jones et al., 2016). In teaching leaders cultural relevance, Jones et al. (2016) and Chunoo and Callahan (2017) pulled on the seminal work of Ladson-Billings (1995) to comprehensively establish the *Five Critical Domains* that conceptualize *Culturally Relevant Leadership* as 1) acknowledging and modifying historical patterns of inclusion and exclusion; 2) increasing the representation of culturally diverse students [and other stakeholders], ideas, opinions, and perspectives; 3) cognitive and personal growth; 4) the quantity and quality of interactions between students; and 5) the structures and processes that routinely affect the students' experiences (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017, p. 43; Jones et al., 2016).

CRL Domain #1- Institutional Histories of Inclusion and Exclusion

Though a challenging topic to confront, culturally relevant leadership draws upon the work of DuBois (1903/1994) and other emancipation pioneers to remind leadership educators of their responsibility to work through "contentious legacies." (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017, p. 43; Topper & Powers, 2013; Mungai, 2023; Wilson, 2021)

CRL Domain #2- Increasing the Representation of Culturally Diverse Students, Ideas, Opinions, And Perspectives

As leaders support the implementation and deployment of programs, media material, and other forums, culturally relevant leadership begs the question of "who is left out" or

whose voice is missing in diverse stories of progress and success? (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017; Mahoney, 2017).

CRL Domain #3- Cognitive and Personal Growth

This domain focuses on leadership reflection in the areas of identity, power, and social status quo on their campuses and among their executive peers (Owen et al., 2017). Jones et al. (2016) suggested within this CRL domain that leaders create coalitions to confront issues of inequity (Hotchkins et al., 2022).

CRL Domain #4- Enhancing the Quantity and Quality Of Interactions Between Groups and Individuals.

This domain challenges leaders to intentionally gain insight from others of differing social identities and to engage in collaboration that may be uncomfortable (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017; Jones et al., 2016). In addition to focusing on interactions with individuals, holism is also a focus where "systems thinking emphasizes the complex and dynamic interactions within the system" (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Guthrie et al., 2017, p. 63).

CRL Domain #5- Disrupting Structures and Processes Routinely Affecting Students' Experiences.

This domain not only challenges leaders to identify systems that unfairly rewards Students based on race and other social identities but requires the leader to draw attention to these structures and "wield their own social privilege(s) to advocate for equity" (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017, p. 44).

Equity Gaps in Educational Outcomes

The reformative remedy for educational achievement gaps, opportunity gaps, and equity gaps require the dismantling of a systemic race problem in America (Carter & Welner, 2013;

Ladson- Billings, 2006; Moore & Lewis, 2012). According to Love (2019), "Education reform is big business, just like prisons…reminding the American people that there is an achievement gap [between whites and racially minoritized people] while conveniently never mentioning America's role in creating the gap" (p.10). As an expressed reminder from Betina Love (2019), Black people were once made to be property, yet are still experiencing bondage in one of the most foundational institutions in America, institutions of education. Relative to the mission of community colleges, Love goes on to point out that even in our economic mobility structures, there is a constant perpetuation of an underclass, people who live below poverty not because they do not work, but because there are not enough jobs paying a livable wage to sustain a household (Love, 2019). The impact of poverty is not only found in households, but in neighborhoods with low-funding levels resulting in lack of resources and underpaid educators. As we look toward addressing equity gaps in community college outcomes, perhaps the most comprehensive scholarship is found in the work of Morales and Hamann (2021) which offers a more current definition of opportunity gaps, building on the work of Ladson-Billings (2006) addressing gaps in access to foundational social, economic, and educational resources needed for well-being across the contexts of schools, communities, and society writ large.

The term "equity gap" has been deemed important by education and social scientists in academic literature and discourse. Although concerns about inequity are widespread and commonly understood as being a measured set of disparities between demographic groups in terms of educational outcomes (Ziegler et al., 2021), understanding of the term is more uncommon depending upon who is conceptualizing. Ziegler et al. (2021) offered an explanation as to why ambivalence arises when defining the term equity gap.

While all competent English speakers have some understanding of the phrase 'equity gap in education', its constituent terms 'equity,' and 'gap,' and 'education' are words of everyday vocabulary and thus fuzzy with non-exact designation. However, when we use the phrase 'equity gap in education,' we classify the *equity gap(s) in education* phenomenon as 'importantly similar' to other entities bearing the same designation. However, this leads to the problem of conceptual unity, which is critical, especially for ethical concepts such as equity. The extension of a concept can indeed be too fuzzy; conceptual unity refers to the realistic probability that all the involved parties are discussing different things. In such a case, the natural first step would be to determine the areas where the ambiguities arise. (p. 2)

A more substantial approach to the longer-term significance of addressing equity gaps in education can be found in Ziegler's nine points for exploring how social theorists and education researchers are attempting to understand this critical issue in higher education.

EQUITY GAPS IN EDUCATION
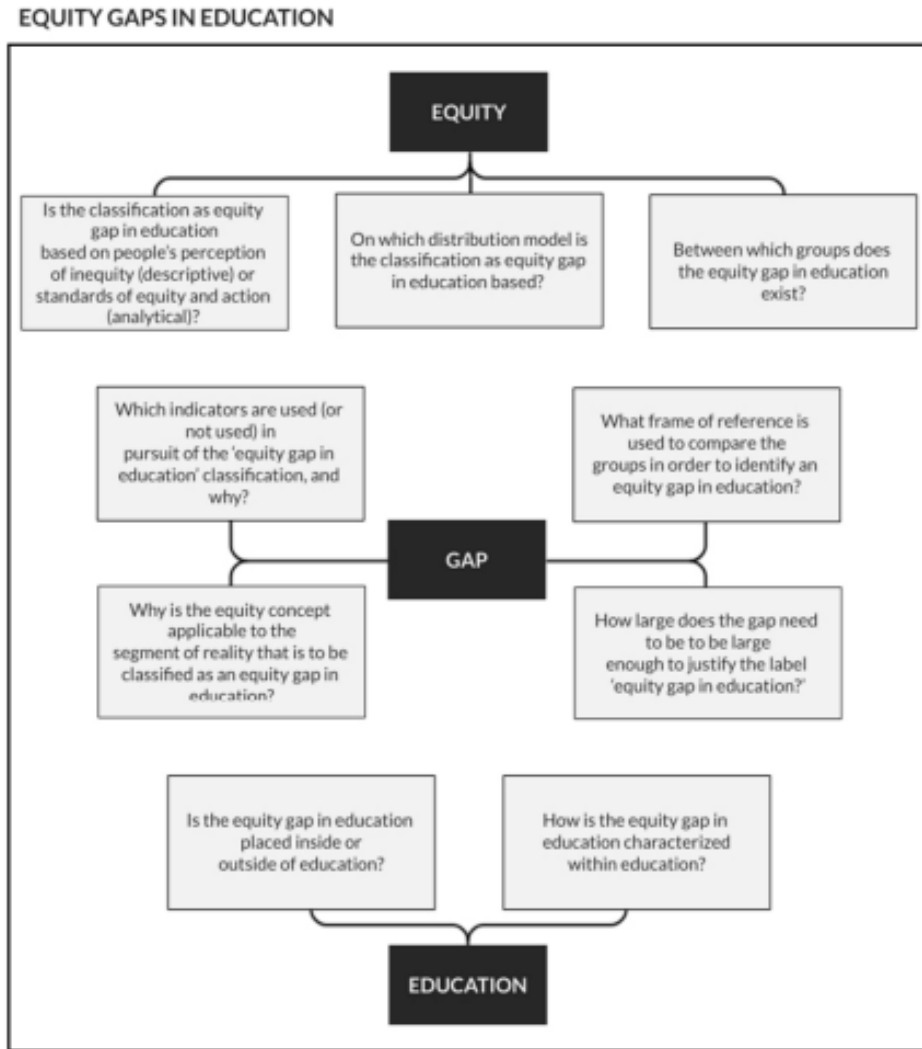
Figure 2: Ziegler's Nine Points Toward More Transparency When Addressing Equity Gaps in Education.

As suggested by Ziegler et al. (2021), the entities most interested in the ethical concept of equity may define the term "equity gap" differently. For the purpose of this study, I will use *Ziegler's Nine Points Toward More Transparency When Addressing Equity Gaps* in Education to guide engagement with research participants.

Equity: Point One- A Descriptive or Analytical Classification?

Research participants were interviewed to gather information about their conceptualized model of equity in terms of descriptive ethics (what do people believe is right or just?) and/or an analytical ethics perspective (what is right to and just and how should people act?) (Ziegler et al., 2021, p. 4).

Equity: Point Two- Determining a Distribution Model

According to Ziegler et al., (2021),

it is not sufficient to state which descriptive or analytical equity concept is used and whether it is used. The ultimate goal should be to be able to relate pedagogical research on equity gaps in education to each other, thus avoiding the equivocal discourse trap. (p. 4)

The Identical Distribution Model expects indicators of equity, such as achievements, participation rates, and opportunities must be identical. Otherwise, they signal a gap.

The Meritocratic Distribution Model considers the contribution of those who benefit from the distribution. Example: students who are already advantaged in some way receive additional support based on their current achievement.

The Need-Based Distribution Model incorporates [known] learning needs into equity considerations, thereby accounting for the snowball effect.

Equity: Point Three- Determining which groups to compare

According to Ziegler et al. (2021),

Equity gaps in education are based on disparities between the actors and groups that violate notions of equity-whether based on a descriptive or an analytical concept of equity- and whatever distribution models are applied. Indeed, a clear identification of the

group is needed. (p. 5) Ziegler et al. also points out that individuals can be affected by multiple equity gaps.

Gap: Point Four- Indicators Used In Classifying The Gap

The Applicability Issue- Ziegler et al. (2021) pointed out that not every difference between groups signals a potential equity gap. It is important to clarify why a gap can be evaluated by an equity standard and how disparities in outcomes impact better life chances (p. 6).

Gap: Point Five- Applicability to The Segment Of Reality

The Reference Issue- Defining a frame of reference by using different concepts (two-year college transitions) and cumulative information (NCCCS Data Dashboard on first to second year progression).

Gap: Point Six- Frame Of Reference To Compare Groups

The Indicator Issue- As a researcher, being transparent in the selection of indicators, justifying why these particular indicators were chosen and others were not. "Indicators of equal potential, achievement, or opportunity can make a big difference regarding the determination of an equity gap" (Ziegler et al., 2021, p.6).

Gap: Point Seven- Measuring Gap Length

The Significance Issue- "There is no objective criterion for when an equity gap in education is actually significant, i.e., neither random nor negligibly small" (Ziegler et al., 2021, p.6).

Education: Point Eight- Geography and Location

Placing the Equity Gap Inside or Outside of Education. "Equity gaps within education could be, for example…school achievement…Examples of equity gaps outside of the

education system include career opportunities for disadvantaged groups transitioning from the education system to the workforce" (Ziegler et al., 2021, p.7).

Education: Point Nine- Characteristics Of The Gap Within The Larger Scope Of Education

This study addresses disparities and equity gaps in community college retention rates (inside the college) which impacts the local workforce (outside the college) with geographical characteristics of both rural and urban settings.

Summary

Community colleges are enrolling a growing number of students from historically underrepresented populations with various cultural backgrounds. Culturally relevant practices have been demonstrated as effective beyond the classroom setting, proving beneficial in building strong learning communities that develop students personally and professionally (Doran, 2021; Han et al., 2014). There is a growing interest among scholars to inform the culturally relevant practices body of work. However, there is not much research that addresses the use of culturally relevant leadership practices in community college spaces. With an in depth look at the literature surrounding the culturally relevant pedagogical framework first offered by Ladson-Billings (1995), we have a foundational understanding of CRP in terms of "how" teachers teach diverse students effectively. A considerable amount of literature has been published on successful implementation of culturally relevant pedagogy and a small amount, in comparison, has addressed culturally relevant leadership in K-12 public education spaces. Culturally relevant leadership focuses on how leaders move institutions forward in accounting for and evaluating issues of social justice, diversity, and inclusion to produce more equitable student outcomes (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017; Doran, 2021; Eddy et al., 2023; Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Jones et al., 2016; Lattimore et al., 2012; Mahoney, 2017; Student Affairs Now Host, 2022). Together, these

studies provide important insights into the growing scholarship surrounding culturally relevant leadership. However, such studies remain narrow in focus dealing only with K-12 or university settings for aspiring leaders.

While the most recent research has focused on antiracism and the role of Black community college presidents leading predominantly white campuses (Hotchkins et al., 2022), the implementation of a culturally relevant leadership framework through policy and practice are essential for all community college presidents and executive leaders, regardless of racial identity. The little we do know about culturally relevant practices in higher education spaces, particularly in community colleges, is largely based on highlighting a deficit in academic student outcomes among Black students, further demonstrating inequities and disparities (Doran, 2021; Flynn et al., 2017; Ray, 2019).

A thorough search of the literature revealed no previous study exploring community college president and executive leadership practices on campuses where there is positive evidence of narrowed equity gaps in measurable student success outcomes between Black and white student groups. This review has demonstrated the shortcomings in our understanding and indicates a need to analyze the roles community college presidents and executive leaders play in leading equity initiatives relative to the cultural and geographical contexts of their institutions. This study seeks to provide scholarship using the five critical domains of the culturally relevant leadership framework to address these research gaps.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

The purpose of this study was to explore the roles and leadership practices of the president and other executive leaders in three community colleges that successfully narrowed an equity gap and produced successful student outcomes over the past five years. Grounded in a culturally relevant leadership lens, this cross-case study explored each of the three institutions' unique intra-organizational dynamics as well as commonalities and differences across the three colleges' successes linked to their leadership roles and practice implementation. A qualitative cross-case research design was the most suitable method for this proposed inquiry. The case study method is effective in addressing the "how" and "why" of this research topic, the community college leaders' policy and practice implementations, and their outcomes. The relevance or "niche" of case study is discovered when two things are present, 1) a contemporary set of events; 2) over which the researcher has little or no control (Yin, 2017, p. 13). The three selected community colleges naturally served as clear and holistic units of analysis as "the case" under investigation. When considering the bounding of time and space related to the case itself, the research design was approached as Schwandt and Gates (2017) suggested, "to describe and explain how everyday practices in specific places [and a specific group of people] are connected to larger structures and processes" (p. 345).

Research Questions

Three questions closely guided the research:

RQ1- How do community college executive leaders use their influence to identify and address barriers for Black students?

RQ2- How does the institutional context and culture shape each community college's strategies and outcomes?

RQ3- What are the key commonalities and differences across the institutions?

Research Design

The major characteristics of this cross-case study design were situational and included the study of culture within the context of the daily lives and roles of community college presidents and executive leaders (Guthrie et al., 2017). Although most qualitative studies involve observation over long periods of time, the interview responses serve to give an "in situ" account of what happens in the everyday leadership of community college presidents and executive leaders that can be linked to more equitable student success outcomes (Mertens, 2019, p. 250).

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection due to the need to probe and go deeper. Although the interview data collection method is time intensive and required coordination of schedules and travel arrangements, each interview took approximately 30-45 minutes; surveying methods would not allow for the level of thick description and rich explanations gathered from interview participants. As the most important tool for interview data collection, I, as the researcher, was able to patiently listen, rephrase responses when needed, and ask follow-up questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Case study research tends to collect multiple types of data to understand the case holistically. Therefore, it was important to collect data from multiple individuals from each institution and complement the interviews with key document data from the institution's website, strategic plan, equity plan, and policy set, as available. On-site interviews allowed for observational field notes to capture the campus atmosphere, making written notations (jot notes) at each visit as part of a site observation narrative.
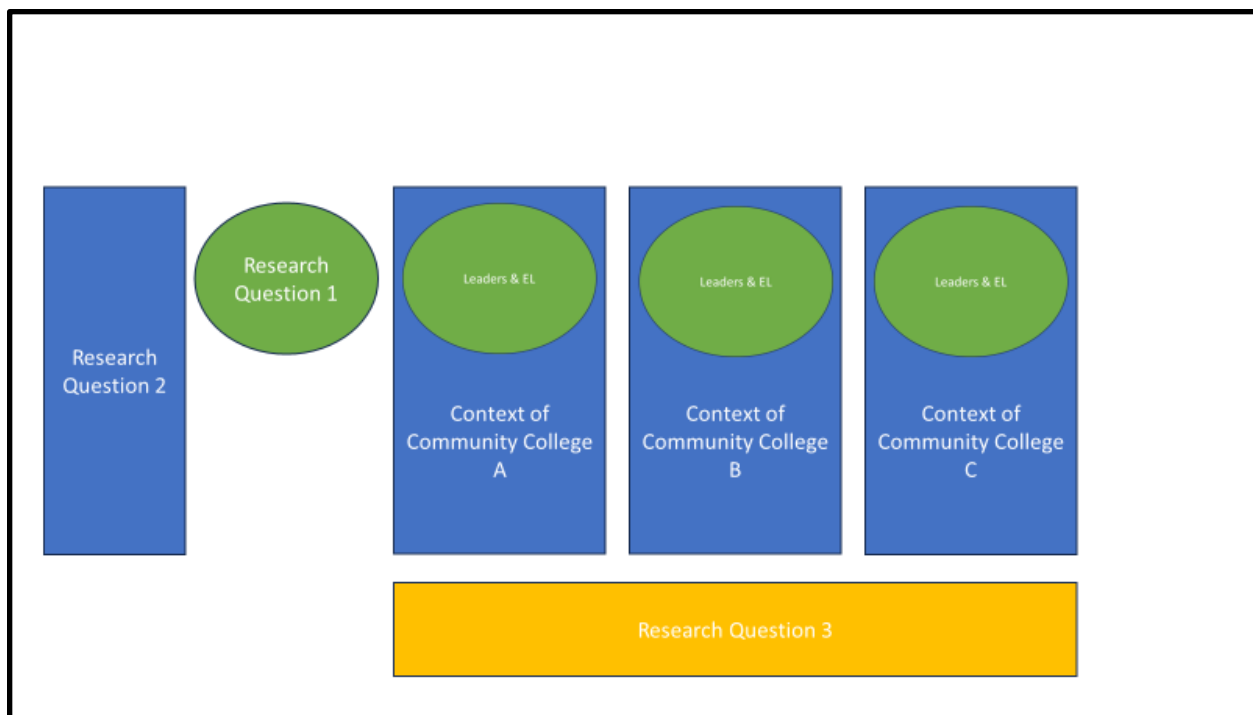
Figure 3: Cross-Case Research Design.

The qualitative cross-case research design first illustrates each community college as an individually bounded case, with the executive leaders situated within the context of their community college.

The Green Ovals illustrate the executive leaders' roles and perceptions, it answers research question one: How do community college executive leaders use their influence to identify and address barriers for Black students?

The Blue Vertical Rectangles illustrate the context of each community college, its size, its geography (rural or urban), unique characteristics of the county it serves, seeking to answer research question two: How does the institutional context shape each institution's strategies and outcomes?

The Gold Horizontal Rectangle along the bottom illustrates the analyses across cases conducted by the researcher, answering research question three: What are the key commonalities and differences across the institutions?

Research Context

Three research sites situated in the southeastern U.S. States were selected based on the State's Community College Student Success Data Dashboard and convenience sampling. The geographical location (rural to urban), enrollment size (small to mid-sized colleges) as well as the diverse racial backgrounds of the community college executive leaders were considered. The community colleges were selected based on at least one existing connection established by the researcher. Based on geography and enrolled population size, the three community colleges' county profile data was used to determine rural and urban characteristics. This State's System of Community Colleges publishes demographic data and reports each college's enrollment by race/ethnicity for the 2021-22 academic year as follows: 20% Black, 12% Hispanic, 2 % Asian, 2% Multiple, 4 % Other, and 60% White (North Carolina Community College System (NCCS), 2023). Each community college's demographic data was reported broadly as not to disclose the college and the participating executive leaders as part of the study.

Data Collection

Based on the most recent publicly available data from the State's Community College System Dashboard Data and Student Success Outcomes (See Appendix A), systemwide data indicates an overall persistence/retention rate of 58.4% for the fall 2021 cohort of students, with Black students systemwide persisting at 47% and white students persisting at 62%. There are 10 community colleges that meet the initial criteria for participation in this study (Overall persistence rate above 50% and an Equity gap $\leq$ 6% between Black and white students for the

Fall 2021 cohort) in first-to-second year student progression (defined as retention for this study).

Further elimination involved keeping the colleges that maintained a low equity gap or made

further progress in narrowing the equity gap over a five-year period before the most recent

cohort data. The researcher eliminated the colleges that did not meet these criteria.

Considerations of college size and proportion of Black and white students were included.

Interview Participants

Interviewees must be currently in a president or executive leadership role and have

served at the institution for at least one year. The participant pool is diverse, varying in

demographic by race, gender, and experience level (measured by total years at the institution.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Contact information was derived from the

institution's website. College presidents and executive leaders at each community college were

contacted by email with an invitation to participate in the study. The researcher reached out

directly to the president and other executive leaders within the organization to avoid the

perception of undue influence.

Obtaining access to elite interviewees can be a key problem when studying

presidents and executives. Therefore, invitations to participate based on the success of their

institutions established their expertise and placed them immediately in a powerful position to

openly share their opinions and thoughts as an "interesting conversation partner" (Brinkmann &

Kvale, 2015, p.171) in order to gain an extent of trust and symmetry in the interview situation.

Document Collection and Field Observation

The researcher collected archival and publicly available documents from each

institution as another source of evidence for further analysis, using a consistent citation format of

each document (Yin, 2017). Documents include institutions' strategic plans, equity plans, policy

documents, or web pages. The researcher arrived approximately 45 minutes prior to the scheduled interviews and made observation notes while on campus but did not speak directly about the study with any students or employees who had not been previously identified as a study participant.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews are considered "primary documents" as they are first-hand or eyewitness accounts of the institutional changes by the interviewees (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Nine total interviews took place on-site, three interviews on each of the three community college campuses included the college president and two executive leaders. The interviews took place in no order, as scheduling availability allowed. A set of ten interview questions were included in the protocol. The participants were not provided a list of questions prior to the on-site interview. The 30–45-minute semi-structured interviews were audio recorded, with verbal and written consent from participants. Prior to the start of the audio recording, an introductory script was read to explain the purpose of the researcher's study and affiliation as a Ph.D. candidate, as well as the anticipated length of the interview (30-45 minutes). It was explained to the participants that questions can be skipped. Issues of confidentiality were discussed, and the participants were given the opportunity to choose an individual pseudonym. Pseudonyms for the college were chosen by the researcher. Pseudonyms were used in the transcription of the interview and analysis of the study. Interview questions were planned with a disclosure that follow-up questions may be asked (probing) based on the responses given. The questions outlined in Appendix B served as a guide during the semi-structured interview. Evidence of the interview transcripts are noted in Appendix C, where the researcher noted any modified questions to connect previous responses given by the interviewee to future questions.

Member-Checking

Member-checking, or participant validation took place during the interview, asking participants to validate their title and years of employment with the college. Participants who chose to take part in the study agreed to a 30–45-minute on-site interview with the principal investigator. The interview questions were about their role and practices as an executive leader. The research topic remained intact, although follow-up questions were asked as part of the semi-structured interview. Following the interview, each participant received an email with the interview transcription and the option to review and make any edits for accuracy. The total time commitment to participate in this study was one hour, 45 minutes for the interview and approximately 15 minutes to review the transcript.

Data Analysis and Procedures

Five steps were taken as part of the data analysis: 1) transcription, 2) coding, 3) memoing, and 4) accuracy checks. The researcher transcribed the audio recorded interviews using an automated transcription service (Rev.com) and reviewed the transcript against the audio file. The participants were also invited to review their individual transcripts for accuracy and offer edits as part of the member-checking and participation validation process. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software NVivo was used to perform initial functions of analysis by organizing the data alongside the transcription. By continually reviewing the transcription, while organizing the data, the researcher was able to move from raw codes to open codes, and then to a more focused coding process to identify categories and themes. The thematic coding and analysis process included a manual highlighting of the interview transcripts to identify direct quotes that would support the findings relative to the original research

questions. Manually highlighting specific in vivo codes allowed for a clear connection between the data and the theoretical framework of the research topic.

With three community colleges and three participants from each, research question one addressed the within case analysis. With initial analysis and creation of inductive codes and categories, I analyzed the three interview transcripts from one institution at a time to draw holistic answers to research question one. Observational field note data was collected using real-time jottings to generate descriptive and inferential field notes (Observation Field Notes are included in the summary findings of each case study). Useful field notes included observations while on campus prior to, during, and after engagement with interview participants relative to the guiding research questions. Content analysis was used as a method to collect and analyze document data. At least one document from websites, strategic plans, and equity plan reports from each community college was collected and summarized to triangulate findings about the institution. This discreet method allowed the researcher to analyze data that would be otherwise formless. The college's unique context (enrollment size and geography) was considered to situate the impact of the institutional context on their perceptions, strategies, and outcomes.

As a cross-case study analysis, the data collection and analysis process for each institution was repeated. Finally, comparing and contrasting across the three institutions to answer research question three to identify the commonalities and differences among them.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to beginning the study protocol, the researcher submitted the required documents and received the necessary approval to conduct research using human subjects from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once given approval from the IRB, research participants received an email invitation with an attached copy of the consent form. The consent form

outlined important information about the study including the purpose of the study, institution and individual participant eligibility criteria, the benefits to participants, the ways participant information would be kept confidential and protected, and an explanation of how the data would be used. Participants were also made aware that they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time. Prior to gaining consent from each participant, they were reminded about the audio and transcription device that was being used during the interview. They were also given a copy of the NCCCS Dashboard Data pertaining to their community college. The purpose of the audio recording was to support the analysis and coding process. The audio recording also allowed the researcher and the participant to engage in a conversational interview without the need to take copious notes.

Assumptions

The implementation of this cross-case research design was grounded in a few important research assumptions. The first assumption of the research design is that every president and executive leader understood and was qualified to speak about equitable education practices based on their lived personal and professional experiences. To support this assumption, an interview question was asked about each participant's values, beliefs, and experiences. An additional assumption was made regarding the relationship between the president and executive leaders' length of employment with the college and their understanding of equitable practices that took place during the five year period that led to successful retention outcomes for Black students. Each participant has been employed for at least one year at the participating community college, regardless of role. Lastly, the research design assumed that all participants, presidents and executive leaders were comfortable speaking openly about challenges faced by Black students, given the title of the study and their college's successful outcomes.

Summary

   This chapter introduced the guiding methodology and approach to exploring the roles and practices of community college presidents and executive leaders whose institutions have experienced successful outcomes in student retention for Black students. The study identified eligible community colleges using NCCCS Dashboard Data. Through a qualitative cross-case research design, the researcher employed data collection and analysis tools to address each of the three research questions of the study. The chapter concluded with transparency statements regarding the limitations and assumptions of the research design. The findings of the study will be presented in the forthcoming chapter.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore the roles and leadership practices of the president and other executive leaders in three community colleges that successfully narrowed an equity gap in first-to-second-year student retention over a five-year period. These insights speak to both the challenges and progressive achievements toward the community college mission of open access and equitable student success. The study's results reflect a constructivist viewpoint on leading with cultural relevance, rooted in the notion that community college presidents and executive leaders are actively involved in the process of collaborating with internal and external stakeholders to share the important mission and vision of equity for RMS, in particular Black students (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Guthrie et al., 2017; Morrison, 2006).

Research Questions

This study had the following three research questions: 1) How do community college presidents and executive leaders use their influence to identify and address barriers for Black students? 2) How does the institutional context and culture shape each community college's strategies and outcomes?, and 3) What are the key commonalities and differences across the institutions?

Research question one explored the way community college presidents and executive leaders use their influence to advance equity for Black or RMS. This question was designed to capture how participants lead equity initiatives on their campuses, often faced with resistance. The reflecting nature of this question allowed community college presidents and executive leaders to consider their personal and professional beliefs, values, and experiences that fuel their commitment to advancing more equitable practices. The semi-structured interview questions included an invitation to share how they gathered feedback from Black students, Black faculty,

and Black staff to identify areas of concern and which policy changes or practices they regarded as most impactful for increased Black student retention.

Research question two sought to extend the exploration of research question one by identifying how the institutional context, including geography, location, size, political landscape, and community relations, determined the ways in which community college presidents and executive leaders employ strategies for Black student success. In addition to sharing elements of their own personal and professional experiences, the participants gave insights into how key stakeholders and unique institutional contexts can drive or prohibit strategic equity initiatives.

Lastly, research question 3 required the researcher to look across the three participating institutions and the thematic analyses derived from interviews with individual community college presidents and executive leaders to identify experiential, structural, and contextual commonalities and differences among them. Research question three provided a synthesis of the data from all the cases, allowing for wider discovery and a more convincing conclusion.

This chapter is organized by first describing the findings of each community college in a case study report. Each case study report includes institutional profile data as well as descriptive data from community college presidents and executive leaders. Demographic descriptors included the participants' category of executive leadership or title, race/ethnicity, gender, and years of service at their respective community college (including years at the college in previous roles). The demographic charts in each case study report outline limited demographic data to preserve the anonymity of president and executive leader participants.

The geographical context of the institution and demographic information about executive leaders were essential in depicting how the participants saw their roles within the organization and their abilities to influence the identification and removal of barriers for Black students. The

findings are organized in the order of the research questions to address the emerging major themes.

Case Study Report: Do Justice Community College (DJCC)

Institutional Profile

DJCC serves one county and is identified in the geographical context as an urban characteristic or neighboring a larger city, according to size and location. With a Fall 2017- Fall 2021 cohort enrollment of 1,833 curriculum students (excluding high school dual enrollment), NCCCS Dashboard data shows a collegewide retention rate of 56.4% (Fall 2021). DJCC's equity gap in the student success measure of fall-to-fall retention rates between Black and white students has narrowed over this period of time from a 9% equity gap in 2016-2017 to a 2% equity gap in 2021-2022, with Black student retention at 52% in comparison to their white counterparts (54%). In the Fall of 2021, DJCC had a total of 495 employees, 52 (or 10%) Black (PT/FT). According to the NCCCS Dashboard on student enrollment distribution by race (regardless of age), DJCC's Fall of 2021 student cohort was 68% white and 10% Black.

Participant Descriptive Data

Before detailing the findings of this case study, the chart below provides participant descriptive data for the president and executive leaders at DJCC.

Table 1: Participant Descriptions: Do Justice Community College.

	Community College	Geo. Context	Years at CC	Position/Title	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
P1- Dr. Balance	DJCC	UC	19	Director of DEI & Faculty Chair	F	W
P2- Dr. Bass	DJCC	UC	19	President	M	W
P3- Dr. Melody	DJCC	UC	3	VP Student Services	M	B

Legend: R: Rural, U: Urban, UC: Urban Characteristic, F: Female, M: Male, W: White, B: Black

Participants

As outlined in Table 1, three participants contribute to the case study report on DJCC. The gender, race, number of years employed at the college (regardless of role), and current position/title were gathered during the on-site interviews. The next section allows for introductions of each DJCC participant using quotes from their interview to gain their personal perspectives on being involved in equity initiatives.

Participant 1: Dr. Balance

Dr. Balance has been both a faculty and staff member at DJCC for a little over 19 years. Beginning as a part-time faculty member, she has always participated in college-wide and community initiatives that aim to positively impact RMS. Dr. Balance identifies as a white female. When asked to reflect on personal values, beliefs, or experiences, Dr. Balance said:

> I talk a lot about love in this work, and I know in the early years I remember being in
>
> sessions and talking about love, and I would have to kind of preface that by saying, this is
>
> a culture shift for us to be in higher education and talking about love. And still, even
>
> today, sometimes out there in higher ed, it's kind of like, why are you talking about love?
>
> It feels very flowery and it's not intellectual enough for higher education or whatever, but
>
> it's about love. I mean, it really is what it comes down to for me. And I don't know, I feel
>
> like really simply put, I think justice is a part of my faith.

Participant 2: Dr. Bass

Dr. Bass was in the role of Vice President of Instruction before being selected as President of DJCC. As a white male president of a community college located in an urban characteristic setting (neighboring a larger city), he recognizes that he leads from a place of

appreciation and vulnerability when it comes to equity. When asked to reflect on his personal experiences, Dr. Bass gave these thoughts:

> We had to have help. And so we began the process of having really candid conversations with each other about our history, working with each other, working with the community. And that was a very therapeutic process I think for me as a leader, but also for the college as a whole and walking through and talking through really who we are and what we're about. But it is what really began to happen. And it truly, I think still as the fundamental theme, is a better understanding for each other. And we might not agree with each other, we might not necessarily be doing this outside of any other situation, but developing an understanding I think leads to a certain level of appreciation.

Participant 3: Dr. Melody

Dr. Melody is the only person of color on the senior leadership team at DJCC. He has been in the role of Vice President of Student Services for three years. Prior to coming to DJCC, he was employed in a student services leadership role at a much larger, urban community college. When asked to reflect on his personal values, beliefs, or experiences as a Black male executive leader at DJCC, he shared:

> we have our leadership meetings, and I'm the only minority here. And so sometimes it's a struggle because there are conversations that are going on that I don't know what they're talking about, and it's not an academic or a skill level type of conversation, it's people they know. It's things that have happened over the weekend, those types of things. But I don't know those people because I'm not in those circles in terms of just hanging out. So when I'm in the leadership meeting here, I have to really market student services. I have to talk about things that they're not talking about just to put it on their radar.

Research Question 1- DJCC Themes

How do community college executive leaders use their influence to identify and address barriers for Black students? Specifically, participants were asked to speak about formal equity initiatives, policies, and practices at their college. They were also asked to speak about the ways they gather feedback from Black students, Black faculty, and Black staff and how they address any resistance to the implementation of equity initiatives.

In the case of DJCC, the themes that emerged in response to this research question highlight lively and active initiatives that are consistent and ongoing as part of the campus culture of DJCC. The two within case themes developed from this research question were 1) Leading With Head and Heart and 2) Communicating with Clarity and Consistency.

Theme 1: Leading With Head and Heart

In this theme, leading with head and heart refers to the expression of transparent and authentic emotion when the leader expresses their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to equity initiatives. In alignment with Mahoney (2017) and the importance of leaders emoting when storytelling, the president and executive leaders of DJCC shared how they handled having difficult conversations about equity and in particular, about the emotional work they do continuously to lead equity initiatives to bring about successful outcomes for Black students. When listening to the president and executive leaders explain their roles and responsibilities in culturally leading (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Jones et al., 2016) the equity and inclusion initiatives at DJCC, each of them spoke about professional practice, and policy (leading with the head), as astute higher education professionals and included elements of the heart (the seat of emotion). This level of expression gave way to exposure to the participants' personal and professional values (Woolsey & Narruhn, 2018) and is a powerful instrument of change through discourse

and dialogue (Foucault, 1980). As stated earlier in the introduction of this study, open dialogue is very important in gaining true knowledge (Cisney & Morar, 2015; DeMarrais & LeCompte, 1999).

The president of DJCC, Dr. Bass, admitted that his motivation for beginning many of the equity initiatives at DJCC was because of his "unrealistic desire for everyone to get along." During the interview with Dr. Bass, he also expressed the need to go beyond transparent, emotional dialogue and to act on what he hears. He shared the following:

And I've had some private conversations where people have called me or come to me or something and said, can I talk to you off the record? So just trying to build trust took time and to create an atmosphere where I think people feel like they're heard, and not only that they're heard, but that something's going to happen because they were heard.

Dr. Bass led the way in the expression of mature, authentic emotion, but he also conveyed the message to his executive leadership team to be appreciative and responsibly active when people trust them with their experiences and emotions.

And then through that appreciation, you begin to want to get along better and develop empathy or sometimes sympathy. And that's really kind of where it all started from. It has evolved to the point where I think we're much better. There's an open dialogue on campus. I don't sense that tension. I don't sense that. We certainly, we're like any organization, and we have our levels of dysfunction, any organization does. But around those types of things, I think there's less dysfunction because we have a better understanding of who we are, certainly as individuals, but as a campus too.

As the Director of Equity at DJCC, Dr. Balance reports directly to the President, Dr. Bass. With an intention to design spaces that are open and ready for the most vulnerable

populations that often turn to community colleges, RMS (Wassmer & Galloway, 2023), Dr.

Balance set out to prepare the college culture for students, rather than focus on what some would

call underprepared students for college. During the interview, she recalled the preparation period

as emotional work.

> and the culture shift that has to occur is emotional and it's hard. And those early years, I
>
> feel like we'd have sessions and things and there would be tears and there would be
>
> anger, and there would be this and that. And I think it takes time. And I think one of the
>
> things I try and [to] share with folks is you've got to remain in a space of hope and you've
>
> got to remain in a space of, I mean, to me, hope is different than optimism. Hope is more
>
> powerful. And so I feel like residing in that space of what can we do right now? And
>
> we're going to do all we can today, and then we're going to come back tomorrow and
>
> we're going to do the same thing.

Slightly differing from Dr. Bass and Dr. Balance in their approach to demonstrate emotional

authenticity to the college at-large, Dr. Melody as a Black male Vice President has come to add a

layer to the musical oratorio of DJCC in the last three years, to create a greater sense of harmony

among Black students, Black faculty, and Black staff. With the realization that he is the senior-

most person of color at DJCC, he said that Dr. Bass supports his freedom of authentic expression

as a Black male during focus groups and staff luncheons with Black employees and RMS,

creating mentorship relationships. Dr. Melody's sentiments were as follows:

> And then it may sound odd, but the reason I did the Black faculty and staff lunch was
>
> someone said to me one time, do you know that you're the senior level black
>
> administrator at the college? And I didn't really think about that when I got hired. I just
>
> thought I was on the leadership team. But when I looked around, I was like, I guess I am

in the role that if it doesn't start with me, it may not ever get started. …you have to

leverage relationships in a very positive way. And I think teaching students how to do

that, teaching faculty and staff how to do that and be okay with it is just another thing you

have to do in leadership because we don't have all the answers, but where we fall short I

think, is that we don't take a step. And so getting students to take a step, getting faculty

and staff to take a step, there were some people who were very scared about coming to

that meeting the other day and they gave me their feedback. And it wasn't that they were

scared that they'd lose their job, but they were scared that it might look divisive.

Theme 2: Communicating with Clarity and Consistency

The second theme that was prevalent in the way the president and executive leaders at

DJCC use their influence to identify and address barriers for Black students is Clarity and

Consistency or tirelessly communicating a clear and consistent message of "why" equity-

mindedness and acting on equity initiatives are important to student success outcomes (Morales

& Hamann, 2021). In alignment with Morales and Hamann (2021), executive leaders at DJCC

gave accounts of times when they had to address educators who were making assumptions about

students and categorizing them as inferior. In relation, Morales and Hamann (2021) stated,

"Deficit thinking blames the underachievement of RMS groups on the students themselves, their

families, and their cultures" (p. 4).

Dr. Bass talked about the work that is still left to be done and the "why" that is just across

the street from his campus. The community he drives through to get to the parking lot of his

office is a daily reminder of the continual work and the consistent message to those he leads.

I think at this campus site, and we have another campus site, there's some serious need

that's literally within a stone's throw. I mean, you could stand on the back corner of the

property, and you could throw a stone. And there's some serious need in our community. And I think that's a thing that we never seem to get right. It's a constant. It means engaging and reengaging. And what I like when we talk about opportunity and equalizing the opportunities, and I think you know enough about what our mission and vision is for equity and inclusion, that so much of the work we do and continue is never done. It's helping people realize that where they are in their lives might not be the best place that they can be and that they deserve better and we can help them get better.

Likewise, toward the ongoing reminders of why equity work at DJCC is so important, Dr. Balance expressed that she has been offering professional development to faculty, staff, and community members for more than a decade. In every facet of her work, she points to the reason behind the work, recognizing that social relations can change and are often shaped and structured by others (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Years ago, we decided we need to really lay out our "why" and we need to be super clear about that and we have to repeat the Why for our community over and over. You have people that miss the messaging. You have people that are getting different messaging out in the world, and we need to be constantly consistently clear about why we're doing this. And when we step back and look at that, it really just comes down to student success and what we are doing to create equitable classrooms.

Research Question 2- DJCC Theme

How does the institutional context and culture shape each community college's strategies and outcomes? The president and executive leaders were asked to reflect on how the institutional context shapes the strategies they employ for equitable student success outcomes. In particular, each participant was asked to describe the unique elements of DJCC, including the location, size,

and political landscape as contributing factors. Participants were also asked to offer recommendations to other community college presidents and executive leaders interested in narrowing equity gaps in student success measures.

In the case of DJCC, one theme emerged in response to this research question, highlighting the support from local board of trustees, county commissioners, and other government officials, not only in word during election cycles, but indeed through the investment of funding and time. The within case theme that emerged from research question two is DJCC's theme three: Supportive Community Leadership.

Theme 3: Supportive Community Leadership

Having served in a leadership role at a community college more than double the size of DJCC, Vice President, Dr. Melody spoke about the importance of having an engaged set of community leaders who not only give fiscal resources but develop supportive relationships with college employees and students, with equity in mind. Dr. Melody shared his insights:

> For me, having been in both an urban community college setting and a more rural community college setting, it seemed like there were more opportunities in the urban setting for urban students just because there were just more of them. And then there were more faculty and staff, and there were more financial resources and more programming. It may have been more surface there, where here [at DJCC] you get to have a more intimate relationships with students [and the community], but it seemed like there were probably more resources at the larger urban campuses.

Dr. Balance, as Director of Equity at DJCC, had been involved with individual leaders and community groups to advance the equity work for student success impacting the local society beyond the campus (Altbach, 2016; Schultz, 2019; Wiggan & Hutchison, 2009). Incongruent

with arguments by many community college leaders about the role of government officials, who say that government officials often support the work of community colleges on the campaign trail, but rarely support the agenda with funding once in office (Mungai, 2023), DJCC has experienced unwavering support from local officials. Dr. Balance testified to the nature of the community leaders' equity-minded approach.

> And I feel like we've been very fortunate with not only our administration, but also really in a lot of ways with our board of trustees and the way that that has run through the years and our mayor and his inclusion of the community. And I feel like in some ways it was kind of the right people at the right time. It just all kind of came together at the right time and the right voices were here. I think around the same time that we were kind of kicking all of this off, we had a group in the area called Partnership for Equity, we were doing a lot of racial equity training in the community, and it was higher ed, the medical profession, the K 12 system, Clergy, nonprofits and law enforcement. And we were all in these sessions together. And DJCC was a part of that. But that was a community organization that kind of, several of us kind of got together and helped with. I'm very grateful that I feel like it was kind of the right place, the right time to get this going. And we had the support to do it.

Dr. Melody went on to talk about community members accepting the invitation to engage directly with Black male students in formal and informal ways as an example of the deep level of supportive community leadership.

> And then we have four community mentors who have been connected to the program, one in banking, one in marketing, one who's on the board of trustees, and one is an active community person. And they come and they're just there. I mean, sometimes they say

things, sometimes they talk with students one-on-one, just there. And they have a

commitment to the community. And so they give us feedback as well.

DJCC: Field Notes and Document Analysis

To corroborate the findings and accounts given by the president and executive leaders at

DJCC, the researcher gathered field or jot notes while on-site. Due to complications with

scheduling the interviews, two visits were made to the main campus of DJCC. One visit was

made while classes were not in session (student break days). Observation field notes (Table 2)

were only made during the site visit when classes were in session, allowing the researcher to

observe the college when fully operational.

In summary, the findings derived from semi-structured interviews, observation field

notes and document analysis strongly support the following emerging themes in the case study of

DJCC: 1) Leading With Head and Heart, 2) Communicating Clearly and Consistently, and 3)

Supportive Community Leadership.

DJCC Observation Field Notes

Table 2: Do Justice Community College Observational Field Notes.

	Real-time Jottings	Descriptive Observation	Inferential Observation
Physical Campus External and Internal to Buildings	Campus located as part of a historic downtown area. Many of the houses aligning the inter-campus streets are used as classrooms and offices. The main buildings surround a courtyard.	Intention has been made to preserve the historic nature of the 18th Century architecture.	Historical context is important to the community. Funding for historic preservation may be used in capital renovation projects.
Private Interview Location	Interview 1 took place in a classroom house/building. Interviews 2 and 3 took place in the Boardroom.	Location of the interview allowed the researcher to observe staff and faculty.	
Campus Community	Food truck on campus (scheduled regularly). Accessible and visible from many classroom buildings and the student center.	No ongoing food option contracted by the college.	Researcher ordered food from the food truck. Prices were very affordable. Food truck rotations offer a variety for students.
Behavior of Students and Employees	Observed younger groups of students on crosswalk through the parking lot.		Observed a few adult students walking between buildings. Adult students

Table 2 Continued

	Real-time Jottings	Descriptive Observation	Inferential Observation
	Did not see many faculty and staff outside of buildings. Walked through the student services building. Greeted by a diverse student services staff.	Appeared to be dual-enrolled high school students.	were not in pairs or groups and did not interact outside of the classroom. Perhaps they were not scheduled for classes together.
Interactions with Study Participants	While in my car, I asked three young adult students for directions (2 white females, 1 Black male)	Students were inviting and welcoming.	Students appeared comfortable with each other and familiar with the campus when giving directions.

DJCC Document Analysis

DJCC leaders provided the researcher with a total of four documents, when asked the interview question, *Which college documents (strategic plan, diversity & equity plan, annual reports, presidents messages, etc.) best communicate the college's commitment to equity?*

1) Equity and Inclusion Plan End of Year Report (May 2021)

2) Equity and Inclusion Plan End of Year Report (June 2022)

3) Equity and Inclusion Plan End of Year Report (2023)

4) DEIJB Updates PowerPoint Presentation (n.d.)

The researcher reviewed the documents and found a substantial amount of information that more than corroborated the information provided by the president and executive leaders during the interview phase of the data collection. The reports provided detailed evidence of specific

curriculum courses within academic programs of study that had been reviewed and developed to promote diversity and inclusion (including courses like ASL-American Sign Language I & II, BLET (Basic Law Enforcement Training), and Crisis Intervention Training Course revisions.

The end-of-year reports and PowerPoint presentation also included the results from an annual Faculty and Staff Inclusion and Diversity Survey, clarifying the survey's purpose to compare data collected in the 2016 baseline survey, further confirming that the efforts at DJCC have been consistently measured to assess growth and to determine opportunities for improvement. A highlight from the document analysis revealed that in 2022, 80.5% (15.8% increase since 2016) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that focused efforts on communications related to diversity and inclusion have improved.

Case Study Report: Love Mercy Community College (LMCC)

Institutional Profile

Love Mercy Community College (LMCC) serves a two-county service area and is identified in the geographical context as urban characteristic (neighboring two larger cities) according to size and location. With the largest enrollment of the three community colleges in this cross-case study, and the largest community college in the state system that met the criteria of an equity gap of $\leq$ 6% between Black and white students, LMCC had a Fall 2017- Fall 2021 cohort enrollment of 2,488 curriculum students (excluding high school dual-enrollment). NCCCS dashboard data shows a collegewide retention rate of 67.1% (Fall 2021). LMCC's equity gap in the student success measure of fall-to-fall retention rates between Black and white students has narrowed over a five-year period of time from a 12% equity gap in 2016-2017 to a 6% equity gap in 2021-2022, with Black student retention at 63% in comparison to their white counterparts (69%). In the Fall of 2021, LMCC reported a total of 519 employees, 65 (or 12%)

Black (PT/FT). According to the NCCCS Dashboard on student enrollment distribution by race

(regardless of age), LMCC's Fall of 2021 student cohort was 71% white and 12% Black.

Participant Descriptive Data

Before detailing the findings of this chapter, Table 3 provides participant descriptive data

for the president and executive leaders at LMCC.

Table 3: Participant Descriptions: Love Mercy Community College.

	Community College	Geo. Context	Years at CC	Position/Title	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
P4- President Versatile	LMCC	UC	16	President	F	W
P5- Vice President Jewel	LMCC	UC	7	VP Student Services & Director of Equity	F	B
P6- Dr. Benevolence	LMCC	UC	21	Exec. VP, Academic & Student Affairs	F	W

Legend: R: Rural, U: Urban, UC: Urban Characteristic, F: Female, M: Male, W: White, B: Black

Participants

As outlined in Table 2, three participants were a part of the within case analysis for

LMCC. The gender, race, number of years employed at the college (regardless of role), and

current position/title were gathered during the on-site interviews as part of the member-checking

and validation process.

Participant 4: President Versatile

President Versatile has been employed with LMCC for 16 years and was in the role

of an external affairs and foundation administrator prior to her appointment as president a year

before the study was conducted. As a white female, when asked about her personal commitment

to advancing more equitable practices at LMCC, she highlighted her desire to strengthen the

community through economic mobility.

And for me it was even more special because I grew up in this area. So what we were

doing was serving the community. It wasn't just about everybody going off to college

somewhere and you just work in higher education. You're looking for ways to make your

community stronger through your higher education institution. And for us here at LMCC,

we're the only higher education institution here. We're not competing with other

community colleges or four year schools. So we are kind of it when it comes to offering

post-secondary education to people who are here and who are not necessarily going to go

away to school. So for me, the community college has been about the strength of our two

counties from an economic development perspective, workforce helping people have

good paying jobs and successful lives. And so I wouldn't be where I am, I don't think, if I

didn't believe that we were here to make things better and to make things better for the

people who are here.

Participant 5: Vice President Jewel

Vice President Jewel has served in a senior executive leadership role at LMCC for

seven years. Her prior professional experiences include four-year universities and HBCUs

(Historically Black Colleges and Universities). As a Black female and the senior-most executive

leader of color at LMCC, Vice President Jewel also serves as the Chief Diversity Officer and co-

leads the college-wide Equity Steering Committee. In response to an interview question, she

believes her presence and voice demonstrate her commitment to the continued advancement of

equity initiatives at LMCC.

I think I use my voice in ways that a lot of people wouldn't use their voice, perhaps out of

fear of potential loss of job. I use my voice, and the person that was the VP before me,

she used her voice. It was a Black woman. So if you think about the leadership of the

work from the timeframe that you're talking about [successful Black student outcomes in student retention], Black people were leading those initiatives.

Participant 6: Dr. Benevolence

Dr. Benevolence has been employed at LMCC for 21 years. She prides herself on knowing almost everyone at the college by first name. In her role as Executive Vice President, she sees a major part of her contribution and commitment as finding resources and support for programming that impacts equitable outcomes.

I just think it is harder as a white female to have those conversations. We've been working on this project with Achieving The Dream, and I kind of keep saying, I know I need to be the one to be saying some of the really difficult things, but I don't always feel comfortable or feel like I have the capacity or the knowledge to really talk about that because I have not experienced… I've experienced it a little bit as a female, but I'm in education, so not really. I don't work in a field where I have struggled or I have felt like I was being discriminated against or I was being treated differently because of one of my characteristics. So I think being aware of and acknowledging that I have shortcomings when it comes to leading and having conversations and pushing back.. I think I can say this is important work.

Research Question 1- LMCC Theme

How do community college executive leaders use their influence to identify and address barriers for Black students? Specifically, participants were asked to speak about formal equity initiatives, policies, and practices at their college. They were also asked to speak about the way they gather feedback from Black students, Black faculty, and Black staff and how they address any resistance to the implementation of equity initiatives.

In the case of LMCC, the theme that emerged in response to this research question was an indication that LMCC executive leaders were not racially specific in their approach to identifying and addressing barriers. There was a focus on all students or students of more broad underserved populations (i.e. low-income, differently-abled). One central theme emerged in response to identifying academic barriers to retention and completion: Altering Policy Structures.

Theme 4: Altering Policy Structures

In alignment with D'Amico and Lewis' (2019) work on policy movements for community colleges, LMCC has joined the bold and very purposeful policy movements of other community colleges across the state and nation, not only identifying barriers and solutions but using policy implementation as a tool for advancing equity (Gonzalez et al., 2021), specifically in the areas of developmental education, accelerated completion, and free (tuition-waived) community college. In this theme, altering academic and programmatic structures refers to the frequency with which the president and executive leaders attributed successful Black student retention outcomes to initiatives that increase student access. These initiatives were centered on finding multiple avenues to and through gateway math and English courses, accelerating successful paths to completion through programmatic structures like eight-week sequenced course scheduling models, and providing an institution-based college promise program offering free tuition for the matriculation of local high school graduates to LMCC. Dr. Benevolence recalled the first phases of altering the college's culture around developmental education and its impact on African-American students.

> But back then we knew from our data that students swirled in Dev. Ed. and it was more
> likely that African-American students swirled than other groups of students. So we sort of
> stuck our neck out there. We went to this thing in Washington DC and basically we

decided we were going to pick an area of the college and we were going to focus on it,
and we were going to improve it and Dev Ed is what we picked. And so that's when we
created a space and a center. It was sort of the precursor of the last [statewide] Dev Ed
model…I'm not sure that it worked everywhere, and maybe that's just about institutional
culture, but when we established the center and allowed some of Dev Ed to be more basic
skills, so it wasn't costing students, you could break outside some of the rules of a pre-
curricular class.

Dr. Benevolence admitted that enrollment and funding was a concern when considering a new
Dev Ed redesign. Education's business model is always at play influencing the decision-making
of leaders pressured with outcomes that make money (Love, 2019; Payne, 2013; Schultz, 2019).
During the interview, she talked about the resistance she experienced at another community
college and the advocacy she enacted at LMCC.

I had worked at another community college and I remember they were so anti-change
because we earned a ton of money on students in Dev Ed, but we had a president who did
really focus on student success, and we were willing to take the hit. We were willing to
make the right decisions for students, and you still gotta keep your doors open, but we
also recognized if it works, then you're going to get those students in curriculum classes
and you're still going to be earning the money. So I think that that was risk-taking
because you weren't certain it was going to work. So I think that was a key with the Dev
Ed Redesign in that we were having to make a call based on student success and not on
the college's bottom line.

In addition to an altered developmental education model that required a college-wide shift, an
accelerated sequenced 8-week course model has been implemented. Vice President Jewel

identified the accelerated curriculum model as an example of identifying and removing the barrier of lengthy program requirements. She stated:

> So we look at our data, we disaggregate our data, we understand how our students of color are doing, and even though overall they may be persisting and completing in certain areas, it takes them a little bit longer to get to that place compared to our other students. And so our institution focuses heavily on all. So I think there have been things that we've implemented, and I can say maybe from 2021 to 2022, the biggest thing that we implemented is eight week courses. And the research shows that the implementation of eight week courses on your campus has a greater impact on student success for marginalized populations.

In the case of LMCC, the emerging theme in response to the first research question, Altering Policy Structures, highlights the college's alignment and willingness to modify frameworks and structures of federally supported programs like Achieving the Dream and Completion by Design, in addition to statewide reformative programs in relation to development education and access to gateway math and English courses. These modifications can sometimes be seen as risky when counting the cost of altering the historical sequence of high FTE (full-time equivalent) generating programs.

Research Question 2- LMCC Theme

How does the institutional context and culture shape each community college's strategies and outcomes? During the semi-structured interviews, the president and executive leaders were asked to reflect on how the institutional context shapes the strategies they employ for equitable student success outcomes. In particular, each participant was asked to describe the unique elements of LMCC, including the location, size, and political landscape as contributing factors.

Participants were also asked to offer recommendations to other community college presidents and executive leaders interested in narrowing equity gaps in student success measures. One theme emerged within the institutional context of LMCC: A Culture of Explanation and Comparison.

Theme 5: Explanation and Comparison

While explanation can be seen as accountability and comparison as benchmarking when it comes to creating equitable environments in politically-charged (campus and community) environments like LMCC, explaining every right thing leaders do for Black students becomes risky and costly in accounting for and evaluating issues of social justice, diversity, and inclusion to produce more equitable student outcomes (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Lattimore et al., 2012; Love, 2019; Morales & Hamann, 2021). Vice President Jewel gave context to why there is sometimes internal resistance to equity initiatives at LMCC based on the anticipation of having to explain to external constituents.

> when you think about the DEIB part, people confuse equity and equality and nobody wants to do anything extra for anybody. They don't want to have to combat, well, you did X for such and such. And so we have this explaining culture that we feel like we have to explain why we do the things that we do to people…and so it puts you in a position to have resistance. [If] You can't really articulate why you're doing what you're doing…I think from a race perspective here, it's the fairness, that if you do something or even not just [for someone because of their] race, LGBTQ plus, or whatever the case may be, even if it's not just race, it's the well, if [we] do it for them, what am I saying about the other people? And what I find unfortunate is that we would prefer to appease the majority, than address the minority group and then, what is the messaging that you're communicating to

that population? So I think that resistance comes from a place of people who truly want to
be fair [or equal].

As an urban characteristic community college close to two major cities, education reform efforts
have long involved elements of race, poverty, and politics (Henig et al., 2001). Today's
community college leaders are challenged with changing the definition of leadership by not
holding fast and true to the same old savior narratives with deficit mindsets about RMS but to
leverage the agility that comes with newly minted leadership roles. Dr. Versatile spoke about the
opportunities she sees as a new community college president, yet not new to her community.

I think that we are a leader in the counties that we serve. And this sounds a little dramatic,
but sort of a beacon for opportunity and for people to move forward. And so I think that I
have to recognize as a leader that we have a diverse community. We have an older
community, we have a conservative community, but we also have been given an
incredible opportunity to help move this community forward. And I think we are well-
respected by our communities. And so even if politics are different or even if life
experiences are different, I think I'm really grateful that we are well-liked and well-
respected. That gives us the opportunity to push forward in ways that might not otherwise
be possible.

In addition to case study data collected by the interview instrument, the researcher
arrived on campus early to observe. Table 4 outlines the real-time jottings and descriptive
observations captured. Inferential observations corroborate the findings from the interview data,
particularly in the focus of serving all underrepresented populations, including low-income and
differently-abled students.

LMCC Observation Field Notes

Table 4: Love Mercy Community College Observational Field Notes.

	Real-time Jottings	Descriptive Observation	Inferential Observation
Physical Campus	Main campus off or interstate. Lots of road construction.	State and City roads under construction at entrance and exit of the main campus. No construction to the college's service road.	State Dept. of Transportation responding to anticipated growth of the area.
External and Internal to Buildings	Buildings are named in honor or memory of past leaders or community members. Campus signage and directions are up-to-date and well-maintained.	Strong connections to past campus and community leadership.	Current campus leaders and community leaders have an opportunity to leave a legacy if lasting impressions are strong and/or financial contributions are made to the college.
Private Interview Location	President's Boardroom	I felt very welcome by all who directed me and greeted me as a guest. I was not asked to wear a name tag.	The staff at the information desks are familiar with employed staff and faculty. They knew I was a welcomed guest and treated me as such.
Campus Community	Non-profit agency was on campus providing community service. Large bus in the parking lot giving free vision screenings.	Community engagement and provision of free resources if placed front and center for student access. Vision Screenings.	Service that all students can benefit from in terms of visual impairment.
	K-12 school district bus was parked on campus, no students on the bus.	Demonstrates welcomed partnership with the county school district.	Location of the parked school bus was in the visitor parking lot not near or in daily designated parking for Early College students. This could be a campus visit/tour of middle or high school students.
	Observed students taking advantage of		

Table 4 Continued

	Real-time Jottings	Descriptive Observation	Inferential Observation
Behavior of Students and Employees	community service agency offering free vision screenings. Observed students (3 Black students) at a bus stop. Branded travel buses used by basketball players.	The bus that arrived was branded with the college's name and logo, arrived and departed from off-campus. Basketball coach loaded the bus and left campus.	Could be a funded transportation initiative with the county public transportation system, specifically routed to and from LMCC campuses. Executive leader confirmed a basketball event that afternoon.
Interactions with Study Participants	Study participants were organized and early or on time for the interviews.	Study participants were well-prepared and eager to talk about the successful student outcomes	The leaders had informally prepared for the interview and discussed their responses to possible questions prior.

LMCC Document Analysis

LMCC Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion WebSite (live link)

LMCC has dedicated a page on the website that states its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. The page includes definitions of key equity terms and lists the college's faculty and staff who promote this commitment by serving on the equity council and as equity champions. The site has been live for quite some time and has updates through 2021.

The site also links to key equity data sources, including the college's 2019 Environmental Scan, yielding an operational plan focused on becoming an equity-minded

college. Updates to the operational plan are listed with responsible employees as champions and the progress of each initiative through 2021.

There have been no updates made to the environmental scan since 2021, and the environmental scan does not address policy-altering goals in alignment with the emerging theme from this study: Altering Structures Through Policy. The level of detail published on the equity web page does support the emerging theme related to the internal college's willingness to share an exorbitant level of information with external constituents: Culture of Explanation and Comparison.

Case Study Report: Walk Humbly Community College (WHCC)

Institutional Profile

Walk Humbly Community College (WHCC) serves one county and is characterized in the geographical context as rural, according to size and location. With a Fall 2017- Fall 2021 cohort enrollment of 910 curriculum students (excluding high school dual enrollment), NCCCS Dashboard data show a collegewide retention rate of 57.4% (Fall 2021). WHCC's equity gap in the student success measure of fall-to-fall retention rates between Black and white students has narrowed significantly over a five-year period, from a 20% equity gap in 2016-2017 to a 3% equity gap in 2021-2022, with Black student retention at a higher rate- 60% in comparison to their white counterparts (57%). In the Fall of 2021, WHCC reported a total of 83 employees, 64 (or 30 %) Black (PT and FT). According to the NCCCS Dashboard on student enrollment distribution by race (regardless of age), WHCC's Fall of 2021 student cohort was 42% white and 29% Black.

Participant Descriptive Data

Before detailing the findings of this chapter, the table below provides participant

descriptive data for the president and executive leaders at WHCC.

Table 5: Participant Descriptions: Walk Humbly Community College.

	Community College	Geo. Context	Years at CC	Position/Title	Gender	Race/Ethnicity
P7- Dr. Whittington	WHCC	R	3	AVP Student Services	F	B
P8- Dr. Carrington	WHCC	R	5	President	M	W
P9- Ms. Stapleton	WHCC	R	3	Chief of Staff & Advancement	F	W

Legend: R: Rural, U: Urban, UC: Urban Characteristic, F: Female, M: Male, W: White, B: Black

Participants

As outlined in Table 5, three participants are part of the within case analysis for WHCC. The gender, race, number of years employed at the college (regardless of role), and current position/title were gathered during the on-site interviews as part of the member checking and validation process.

Participant 7: Dr. Whittington

Dr. Whittington is a Black female leading Student Services and student success initiatives at WHCC. This has been her only role at WHCC, joining the administrative team at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. As a first-generation, underrepresented minority undergraduate student, she recalled important relationships that help her find success.

I think just myself, being a minority first generation college student, I understand how higher education can change lives. So when I came here, I was committed to seeing that this institution does everything that we can to help our students be successful because we know all of our students have challenges, some have more challenges than others, but oftentimes it's having that one person that can guide them and provide them with the resources, give them the motivation, recognize when they're doing well, so that they

continue to want to progress and complete. So personally, it was a vested interest in being a first generation college student and having a wonderful admissions counselor when I was in college that motivated me and encouraged me to be the best student I could be, and complete.

Participant 8: Dr. Carrington

The president of WHCC is Dr. Carrington, a white male who grew up not far from the college he has led for five years. He is relationship-driven and began his interview by complimenting Dr. Whittington on her leadership efforts that have led to the successful student outcomes they are seeing. He stated,

Well, I'm from this part of the State. I grew up an hour from here, so I kind of understand where we are. I embrace it. I don't want to be anywhere else. I don't want to be in Charlotte, don't want to be in Charlotte. I want to be right here. And I just feel like that if you're small, more agile, you can turn it around faster than a larger school. A larger school is hard to really, it's like a battleship and a rowboat…Well, I'm engaged. I like to say I'm engaged with our students every day. There's not a day that goes by that I won't walk in every building and at different times just to make myself available. I like when students say, Hey Dr. Carrington. They know me, I like that.

Participant 9: Ms. Stapleton

Ms. Stapleton is the Chief of Staff at WHCC. . She has been with the college for three years in this role. Prior to a professional career in higher education, she worked in community agencies with the unemployed, igniting her passion and advocacy for higher education and the workforce. When asked about her personal values, beliefs, and experiences, Ms. Stapleton shared openly:

Well, yes. It's personal for me. I mean…I was a first-generation college graduate myself, so I have a heart for those students that are trying to find their way when their parents didn't go to college. But that was the one thing my dad told me, you will go to college, you will get a degree. That was never debatable for me. During my senior year in high school, my dad got laid off from the company that he had worked at since he was 20 years old. So, all of a sudden, he was unemployed. My mom had never worked. She'd been a homemaker. But because he had lost his job, I qualified for Pell Grant. I also got academic scholarships.

Research Question 1- WHCC Theme

How do community college executive leaders use their influence to identify and address barriers for Black students? Specifically, participants were asked how they garner college-wide support for the removal of challenges and if they experience internal resistance. The president and executive leaders at WHCC talked about how important it is to be present and within proximity to students on a regular, daily basis.

Theme 6: Leaders on the Frontline

Leadership as a frontline service to students refers to the leader's ability to gather first-hand feedback from students and employees in everyday situations. This requires the leader to be close enough to the diverse stories of progress and success. Dr. Carrington gave a specific example when asked about his expectation of faculty engagement with Black students in particular:

They're [students] are going to have enough roadblocks and we just got to help them maneuver that path. But I just want it to be a smooth transition. I want them to know that, hey, we are here for 'em. I want them to have a phone number and an individual they can

call. And just following up with that, even our instructors, [if] you haven't seen a student

for two different class meetings. You need to get on the phone and find out what's going

on, send 'em a text, do whatever. But you gotta make contact and that one contact can

make a world of difference.

Even at a small rural college, making personal contact with students can be difficult. And some

staff at WHCC have resisted, arguing that it's impossible to do this for all students. Dr.

Whittington leads the student services area of the college and expressed her appreciation of Dr.

Carrington for taking a strong and public stance about addressing the needs of Black students

recognizing historical systems of oppression.

I think with anything, I think some people have the belief that sometimes when it comes

to students, that mentality that all students have challenges. But our president was quick

to respond that yes, all students have challenges, but some have more than others, and we

want to make sure that the playing field for our students is equal. So he kind of nipped

that right in the bud.

The three executives interviewed at WHCC, including the president, gave testimonies of working

directly with students who experienced challenges in pursuit of their educational goals. They also

gave examples of how they each used their influence to remove the barriers for students with a

hands on, front line approach. Dr. Carrington described his everyday interactions with students

as president.

And so you just sit and talk with 'em and so you gotta be available and you say your

door's always open, but even if you say your door's always open, folks may be reluctant

to come. Certainly students [won't] come to see the president. So I get out and I go where

they are, kind of meet 'em where they are. We know what that means, meet 'em where

they are. Sometimes it's around the drink machine, over at the WHCC Cafe out in the

common area. Just pull up a chair and sit and talk. So it can be informal. Informally…

and just kind of speak with them where they are. It's so important that we welcome

people to this campus and then [we] show an interest. I don't think it's anything we

learned in school. I think we learned that at home.

Ms. Stapleton, WHCC's Chief of Staff, called the frontlines "the trenches." When asked what

advice she had for other community college executive leaders seeking to narrow or eradicate

equity gaps between white and Black students, she said:

the biggest advice that I would give…I think it's important that they spend a little time on

the front lines learning their student population and talking with their students and

finding out what their needs are and what their challenges are. I think sometimes it's easy

when you're in leadership, and I hate to even use the term flying at a higher level, but

sometimes you find yourself removed from the trenches. And I like to think that that's

what we do well [at WHCC] is we get back in the trenches to find out what's going on on

the front lines so that we can better address and we better know what the needs are and

we're not oblivious or have blinders on about what is going on.

While WHCC is located in a rural context in the southeast, in contrast to more urban

characteristic settings near larger cities, representation of Black staff is not only demonstrated

quantitatively, but field observation notes made by the researcher indicated a notable presence of

Black staff when observing the campus during a two hour period. Black employees were present,

accessible, and engaged.

Research Question 2- WHCC Theme

Theme 7: The Rural Rapid Response

Dr. Carrington, president of WHCC understands his community, having grown up not far from the campus. During the campus interview, he expressed his preference for leading a small, rural community college because of his ability to not only identify needs, but make major cultural shifts when needed.

And I just feel like that if you're small, more agile, you can turn it around faster than a larger school. A larger school is hard to really, it's like a battleship and a rowboat. We could spin this baby around if we need to and make adjustments. And I think the overarching idea or what I try to do is cultural. The culture of who we are and how we go about doing what we do and take pride in what we do and we want to be effective.

When asked about a key stakeholder that helps to shape the strategies and outcomes WHCC employs, Dr. Whittington gave an example of a partnership between the county government and the community college that quickly addressed the transportation needs of students.

I definitely say the county. I mean, the county has been phenomenal. I don't know of any, even before I came here to WHCC, I didn't know of any community college that has a county that provides the support that we need to be able to provide free transportation to students each week at a very affordable cost for the institution. We pay a flat fee per student to ride [from home to campus]...The fee is nominal, but the county pays for all the drivers, pays for all the vehicles. I mean, it's phenomenal.

Table 6: Walk Humbly Community College Observational Field Notes

	Real-time Jottings	Descriptive Observation	Inferential Observation
Physical Campus External and Internal to Buildings	Very distinct, well-labeled driveway off of a two-lane road creates clear campus access.	Well landscaped (note late Feb.), manicured grass and season-appropriate flower beds full of color on the exterior and interior of campus. The entrance includes two ponds with a water feature at the entrance of the campus.	The community college campus is cared for well, among any of the buildings I passed off of the major highway or the two-lane highway. This is most likely seen by students as an important place in the community and a place to take pride in.
Private Interview Location	President's boardroom is off of the main hallway, though locked upon my arrival, it was easy to find and did not require access through the executive administrative assistant's office area.	Transparency in who is meeting with the president and a welcoming space for board meetings and other public official gatherings. Following me reserved time for interviews, the boardroom was used by the faculty members for a meeting.	The boardroom is not held as a sanctuary, inaccessible and private. Transparency and comfort is felt by all on campus in regard to the boardroom space.

Table 6 Continued

Campus Community	A small minibus labeled "public transportation" picked up an adult female (Black Female).	The bus is used throughout the community, owned by an entity other than WHCC.	Highlights partnership with public county transportation for WHCC students.
Behavior of Students and Employees	A student (WF) was working the main desk as I entered the building for the president's office and boardroom.	While waiting, the student answered the phone and began giving admissions and registration information to the person on the other line, identifying herself as a student and sharing her experiences.	The behavior of students and employees are congruent with the information shared during the interviews. The environment is comfortable, yet organized and professional.
	Photos in hallways are not stock images or abstract art. Canvas photos display real students and in particular, many students of color wearing WHCC paraphernalia. Black males were highlighted in a photo just outside the boardroom.	Students, in particular Black students, are celebrated at WHCC in public and permanent ways	WHCC faculty, staff, and students, particularly Black students and employees, expect to be celebrated and included.
	Increased presence of employees of color.	Within a two hour period, I was greeted in	There is increased representation of Black staff and faculty. Though a

Table 6 Continued

		passing by 7-10 Black employees.	small campus, they are present about campus and engaged.
Interactions with Study Participants	The president and executive leaders were complimentary of each other at the onset of the interview and communicated with each other about the coordinated interview schedule.	Each participant appeared to be calm and not rushed.	The president and executive leaders dedicated time to the research project and deemed it important.
		One of the executive leaders requested a copy of the snapshot of the NCCCS Dashboard Data showing the successful retention rates for Black students.	The conclusion of the interview did not end their interest in the research topic and the data.

WHCC Document Analysis

Strategic Plan (2020-2025)

The most recent publicly available strategic plan does not include goals or objectives related to student retention for specific groups of students. The plan does not include equity and diversity initiatives. Instead, the WHCC strategic plan includes a commitment statement to infuse global concepts and international education into programs and services.

Website

The main web page outlines the five values, which explicitly include diversity. As part of the value set, WHCC describes the value of diversity as an educational environment that supports a diverse faculty, student, and staff community. The president's message to students on the web page corroborates one of the themes that emerged: Leadership as a Frontline Service. The message from the president ends with the statement: "Again, welcome to WHCC, and please let me know if I can serve you. My door is always open."

Cross-Case Analysis: Commonalities and Differences

Rather than highlight one good community college that narrowed the equity gap in student retention, three community colleges within their unique contexts served as individually bounded cases, allowing the researcher to make a more compelling interpretation. The findings reveal the complexities of community college leadership in relation to equitable student retention outcomes. Each case study provided a rich description of how three executive leaders, including the president, perceive their roles concretely and contextually in not only identifying challenges presented that impede the progress of Black students, but also taking action to remove those barriers using local resources and solutions. From the descriptive data in each case, themes were developed using a systematic coding analysis process. In addition to amplifying the voices of the executive leaders through semi-structured interviews, each case study also included field observation notes from the researcher's on-site campus visit as well as a content analysis of publicly available documents referenced by the executive leaders to triangulate the data.

The next section, generalized commonalities and differences, offers a cross-case analysis across research questions 1 and 2 to determine how community college executive leaders 1) use their influence to identify and remove barriers for Black students and 2) see the

institutional context and culture in the shaping of the strategies they use. The comparative

analysis strengthens the validity and stability of the findings (Yin, 2017). Rather than viewing

each community college and the leaders within its context separately, this section seeks to

answer research question 3) *What are the key commonalities and differences across the*

institutions?

To begin the cross-case analysis, Table 7 offers a comprehensive look at the nine participants.

Table 7: Participant Descriptions: Across Three Community Colleges.

	Community College	Geo. Context	Years at CC	Position/Title	Gender	Race/Et hnicity
P1- Dr. Balance	DJCC	UC	19	Director, DEI & Faculty	F	W
P2- President Dr. Bass	DJCC	UC	19	President	M	W
P3- Dr. Melody	DJCC	UC	3	VP Student Services	M	B
P4- President Versatile	LMCC	UC	16	President	F	W
P5- VP Jewel	LMCC	UC	7	VP Student Services, Dir. Equity	F	B
P6- Dr. Benevolence	LMCC	UC	21	Exec. VP, Academic & Student Affairs	F	W
P7- Dr. Whittington	WHCC	R	3	AVP Student Services	F	B
P8- President Dr. Carrington	WHCC	R	5	President	M	W
P9- Ms. Stapleton	WHCC	R	3	Chief of Staff & Advancement	F	W

Legend: R: Rural, U: Urban, UC: Urban Characteristic, F: Female, M: Male, W: White, B: Black

Note: Cross-comparatively, the participants are generally categorized in two ways: presidents

and executive leaders who report to the president. All participants in the role of president are

white- two males and one female. All of the participants in the student services executive

leadership role are Black- two females and one male. The experience in their current roles and commitment to the institution ranges from three to 21 years.

Generalized Commonalities and Differences

The Role of the President, The Longevity Factor

The three community colleges are currently led by white presidents (one female, two males). The president of DJCC has been employed with the college for over 19 years in other roles, serving as president for 12 years. The president of LMCC has been employed with the college for 16 years in other roles, serving as president for less than a year at the time of this study. The president of WHCC has served in the role of president at this institution for five years (no previous titles held at this college) and was preceded by a Black male who served in the role of president for 13 years.

Varied Levels of Representation of Black Executive Leaders, Faculty, and Staff

While none of the colleges included in this study are led by Black presidents, each college's executive leadership team has at least one Black male or female who meets with the president regularly. However, each community college slightly differentiates positions and titles. One note of comparison among executive leaders is that two participants have diversity, equity, and/or inclusion in their titles- Dr. Balance (WF) at DJCC and Vice President Jewel (BF) at LMCC. While WHCC does not have an executive leader designated to handle the work of equity, it has the highest percentage of Black employees (30%) in faculty and staff roles. With 30 percent of its faculty and staff having a Black racial identity, WHCC has the largest representation, more than double the number of Black employees than either of the other community colleges cases (DJCC 10% Black employees; LMCC 12% Black employees).

Male Minority Mentoring Programs Live On, Regardless of Funding Source

Each of the community colleges shared the commonality of a male minority success initiative aimed to aid in the success of Black male students through supportive programming. Though branded uniquely at each college, each college's executive leader over the student services area boasted the program's success regardless of statewide or local funding commitments.

DJCC's Dr. Melody, Vice President of Student Services, thanked the president for investing when state-funding was cut-off. She stated,

> [Our] minority male mentoring program…We did not get funding for that from the state. And so really the president said what they did not give you, I will find institutional funds to help you do what you want to do. So institutional funding is big.

Vice President Jewel, leading Student Affairs and Equity highlighted their program that focuses on Black male achievement as well. She expressed, "We have the Minority Male Success Initiative on our campus. And so we've done focus groups with our men of color, specifically men of color." The third case study's AVP of Student Services, Dr. Whittington, gave more detail about their focus on minority males at HCC. He stated:

> I would definitely say the WHCC Men of Distinction Program, because that program, the Success Coach meets with students every month. They have monthly events. They have activities where we bring in speakers to provide motivation to our male students. Our success coach uses our retention tool to monitor student performance. And all of our minority male students are assigned to that success coach. So our success coach is alerted of any grade or attendance issues that our minority male students have, and they can intervene as needed, as well as celebrate accomplishments. So it's not just about the

success coach addressing performance issues with our minority male students. It's also

recognizing when they're doing well inside the classroom as well as outside the

classroom. I would say that's a big component of it.

A Thematic Analysis Across Cases

The constant comparative method (Yin, 2017) can help depict differences among

groups of data to better understand why commonalities or differences arise. Using the themes

that emerged for each community college's case study, the figure below illustrates the

relationship between them in relation to research question one, 1) How do community college

presidents and executive leaders use their influence to identify and remove barriers for Black

students? and research question two, 2) How does the institutional context and culture shape

each community college's strategies and outcomes?, including each theme's relationship to the

domains within the culturally relevant leadership framework (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017; Jones

et al., 2016).

Table 8: Comparing Case Themes Using the 5 Culturally Relevant Leadership Framework

Domains.

Themes Across Cases	RQ 1	RQ2	CRL 1	CRL 2	CRL 3	CRL 4	CRL 5
Theme 1/Case 1: Leading with Head and Heart	x		x		x		
Theme 2/Case 1: Communicating with Clarity and Consistency	x					x	
Theme 3/Case 1: Supportive Community Leadership		x				x	
Theme 4/Case 2: Altering Policy Structures	x		x				x

Table 8 Continued

Themes Across Cases	RQ 1	RQ2	CRL 1	CRL 2	CRL 3	CRL 4	CRL 5
Theme 5/Case 2: Culture of Explanation and Comparison		x	x				
Theme 6/Case 3: Leadership as a Frontline Service	x			x		x	
Theme 7/Case 3: The Rural Rapid Response		x	x				x

Note. The Five Critical Domains that conceptualize Culturally Relevant Leadership are 1) acknowledging and modifying historical patterns of inclusion and exclusion; 2) increasing the representation of culturally diverse students [and other stakeholders], ideas, opinions, and perspectives; 3) cognitive and personal growth; 4) the quantity and quality of interactions between students; and 5) the structures and processes that routinely affect the students' experiences (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017, p. 43; Jones et al., 2016).

Chapter four began by presenting a comprehensive Case Study Report for each community college as a bounded case. The reports included themes that emerged from the coding and analysis of the interview transcripts within each case. Research questions 1 and 2 were addressed within each case, including triangulation of the data, which included field observation notes and the analysis of at least one publicly available document for each community college. Finally, Chapter four provided a depiction of the thematic findings across the cases, comparing the themes in relation to the five culturally relevant framework domains. The next chapter will provide interpretive meaning by integrating the findings with existing literature and offering recommendations to the field, along with possibilities for future research.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Overview of the Research Study

This study contributes to existing literature that supports the development of culturally relevant leaders in higher education to drive forward equitable outcomes in college retention and completion rates for racially minoritized student populations. Additionally, this research provides recommendations from community college presidents and executive leaders who serve in institutions demonstrating successful outcomes in the student success measure of Black student retention compared to their statewide sister institutions. Current literature revealed no previous study exploring community college executive leadership practices on campuses where there is positive evidence of narrowed equity gaps in measurable student success outcomes between Black and white student groups.

Culturally relevant leadership focuses on how leaders move institutions forward in accounting for and evaluating issues of social justice, diversity, and inclusion to produce more equitable student outcomes (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017; Doran, 2021; Eddy et al., 2023; Fraise & Brooks, 2015; Jones et al., 2016; Lattimore et al., 2012; Mahoney, 2017; Student Affairs Now Host, 2022). This study analyzed the roles community college presidents, and executive leaders play in leading equity initiatives relative to the cultural and geographical contexts of their institutions. This study sought to contribute to the scholarship of culturally relevant leadership practices in the realm of community college higher education.

Research Questions

Overall, this study identified a concern with community colleges being identified as part of a historical racialized plan to perpetuate inequities by using their open-door mission to enroll high rates of RMS (access), but not being prepared to identify and address challenges that

impede progression to completion (success). Through Foucault's Biopower theory and the theoretical framework of Culturally Relevant Leadership, Chapter 1 established three research questions that framed the focus of this study:

1) How do community college presidents and executive leaders use their influence to identify and address barriers for Black students?

2) How does the institutional context and culture shape each community college's strategies and outcomes?

3) What are the key commonalities and differences across the institutions?

Chapter 2 provided a comprehensive review of the literature regarding contextual perspectives on community colleges and the challenges associated with leading such complex institutions of higher education through a Culturally Responsive Leadership lens. Non-exempt from challenges faced by all educational institutions at large when it comes to serving a racially diverse student population, Ziegler's Nine Points of Transparency were used as a concrete way to define educational equity gaps as a leveling tool. Chapter 3 presented a qualitative cross-case study as the research methodology to bring to light how the roles and practices of community college presidents and executive leaders in their local and cultural context contribute to more positive student retention outcomes for Black students. Chapter 4 presented the findings from each individual case study, thematically by research question and by cross-case alignment with the five culturally relevant leadership domains (Table 8). The data derived from the semi-structured interviews were triangulated with the analysis of field observation notes and a public document content review as part of a holistic approach to understanding the context and culture of the community college campuses.

Chapter 5 recalls the existing literature and the culturally relevant leadership theoretical framework to support the findings and conclusions while relating this study's implications to the practice of community college presidents and executive leaders. Lastly, implications for the field of community college higher education and recommendations for future research will be offered related to the achievement of equitable student outcomes in community college settings.

Interpretations: Findings Related to Existing Literature

When relating the findings to the existing literature, the seven themes serve as responses to the research questions. With respect to the first research question, it was found that community colleges and executive leaders use elements of the culturally relevant leadership framework to identify and remove barriers for Black students. This section also outlines the evidence of the literary connection to the themes that emerged in a pursuit to answer the second research question inquiring as to how the institutional context and culture shape each community college's strategies and outcomes.

When examining the themes in relation to the literature review, we see strongly woven threads of Ladson-Billings' (1995) grounded theory of CRP. The three tenets include 1) concepts of self and others held by culturally relevant teachers, 2) the manner in which social relations are structured by culturally relevant teachers, and 3) the conceptions of knowledge held by culturally relevant teachers. This study confirms that community college presidents and executive leaders whose institutions are yielding narrowed equity gaps in student retention demonstrate practice in association with the underpinnings of culturally relevant pedagogy and leadership practice when addressing equity gaps (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017; Cisney & Morar, 2015; Jones et al., 2016; Ziegler et al., 2021). The next section offers a discussion relative to the seven themes and their

alignment with the research questions and the literature. An illustrated summary follows in Tables 9 and 10.

RQ1 Theme- Leading with Head and Heart

Just as teachers in a K-12 system must be highly aware of the concepts they hold of themselves and others, community college presidents and executive leaders at DJCC recognized their ability to lead with high levels of cognitive and emotional competency. With a focus on professional development for faculty, this thematic finding balances the need for community college leaders to address the social and emotional aspects of diversity and equity initiatives while also identifying the academic programming and professional development components that surface in everyday classroom practices, particularly for racially minoritized student populations (Wassmer & Galloway, 2023).

RQ1 Theme- Communicating with Clarity and Consistency

Communication and dialogue are essential components of identifying social structures and evaluating knowledge, as depicted in the CRP tenets. Clarity and Consistency in communication is another important finding of this study as it re-emphasizes the importance of challenging dominant discourses and power structures (Foucault, 1980). Rather than protecting knowledge, which maintains dominance, DJCC transparently shares information in a clear and consistent way to break down traditional power structures.

RQ1 Theme- Altering Policy Structures

CRP addresses the concepts of knowledge by asking the question, "What is knowledge, and how does one demonstrate it?" With this in mind, the current study found that as many of the classrooms and K-12 leaders studied as part of previous research, LMCC established new policy structures for access to essential gateway courses and altered policies (Morales & Hamann, 2021;

Wassmer & Galloway, 2023) to allow for multiple ways of identifying competency-based

knowledge outside of standardized testing and traditional methods.

RQ1 Theme- Leadership as a Frontline Service

CRP addresses the ways in which social relationships are structured by teachers to

achieve learning. The most obvious finding to emerge out of the case study at WHCC in relation

to CRP and CRL is that the community college president and executive leaders were focused on

increasing the quality and quantity of their direct interactions with RMS by intentionally seeking

representative input and responding with appropriate programming like faculty shared

responsibilities and peer mentoring. With increased direct engagement with Black students and

direct access to resources on and off campus, leaders are quickly able to find and implement

solutions.

RQ2 Theme- Supportive Community Leadership

The emergence of this theme in response to RQ2 is significant in at least two major

respects: 1) The community college president and executive leaders at DJCC are appropriately

relying on community leaders, including appointed board members, volunteers, and elected

officials, to share in the responsibility of shaping the college's culture, and 2) The students,

faculty, and employees are better connected to a pipeline that transitions students from education

to the local workforce. By fostering networks between the college and the community for the

benefit of RMS, we see alignment with CRL Domain 4- the quantity and quality of interactions

(Jones et al., 2016) as well as Ziegler et al.'s (2021) framework urging leaders to properly

identify if the equity gap will be addressed inside or outside of the institution. As a finding of

this study, perhaps as a hidden significant finding, it may be that community colleges, unlike

their K-12 partners or their residential university constituents, cannot address the geographical

context of their equity gap efforts in one place or another (inside or outside of the college) as Ziegler's (2021) suggested in point eight of the model, but rather due to the reliance on supportive community leadership, the culture and context is constantly being shaped inside and out.

RQ2 Theme- A Culture of Explanation and Comparison

Geographically characterized as an urban characteristic institution, this theme arose as a finding of the LMCC case analysis. As the largest and one of the oldest of the participating community colleges, the college also has the widest equity gap, capped at the eligible level of 6%. Here, we immediately identify the literary alignment with the CRL Domain 1- acknowledging and modifying historical patterns of inclusion and exclusion. A note of caution is due here since there is obvious incongruence in the way the executive leaders, including the president, perceive the culture and context of the institution. This finding suggests that it may be more difficult to modify historical patterns that are inherently found in a larger, more urban institution. Not only do we find evidence of a culture of constant external explanation for internal decisions about equity for disadvantaged groups (Ziegler et al., 2021), but we also find a constant comparison between what change could look like in the future based on the past. The present study raises the possibility that without internal resolve and confidence of leadership in making decisions that are best for disadvantaged groups (not just for the fairness of all), significant progress cannot take place. The heightened political and social influence in more urban areas places strongholds on leaders.

RQ2- The Rural Rapid Response

Within a larger system, many underestimate the results produced by smaller institutions. It is possible that the findings of this study's rather intriguing findings relative to WHCC might

explain how we can learn from the small but mighty and commit to scaling for similar results. As the smallest community college participating in the study, there was evidence in every data collection point that the president and the executive leaders' perceptions of their ability to influence began with CRL Domain 1- acknowledging and modifying historical patterns of inclusion and exclusion. The portrait of a long-serving Black male president hangs on the walls of the entrance as a symbol of inclusion, and the current president, a white male, expressed his readiness to lead by example and to address any resource deficits for disadvantaged students by advocating through the Board of Trustees and County Officials for funding. CRL Domain 5-, the structures and processes that routinely affect the students' experiences, provides another possible explanation for this theme's emergence. The college president consistently reports to community leaders with disaggregated data on specific student populations, and the board requests follow-ups about the improvement of student experiences, quickly making decisions to resolve issues. In interpreting the findings from this case analysis, perhaps the most unexpected and most significant finding is that not only did this small, rural community college have the most narrowed equity gap in the average of the five-year period among all colleges participating, but the latest available data point demonstrated the elimination of the equity gap (Ziegler et al., 2021), where the Black student retention rate was higher than any other peer group.

Table 9: Interpretation of RQ1 Themes in Relation to Theoretical Frameworks and Literature.

Themes Emerging from Research Question 1:	Relationship to Literature
How do community college presidents and executive leaders use their influence to identify and address barriers for Black students?	

…by	
Leading with Head and Heart	● Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) ● CRL Domains (Jones et al., 2016) ● Success for Black Students (Wassmer & Galloway, 2023)
Communicating with Clarity and Consistency	● Biopower & Discourse (Foucault, 1980) ● CRL Domains (Jones et al., 2016)
Altering Policy Structures	● Two-Year Thompson Scholar Learning Community (Hallett et al., 2020) ● Removing Barriers (Morales & Hamann, 2021) ● CRL Domains (Jones et al., 2016)
Leadership as a Frontline Service	● Removing Barriers (Morales & Hamann, 2021) ● Two-Year Thompson Scholar Learning Community Model ● (Hallett et al., 2020) ● CRL Domains (Jones et al., 2016)

Table 10. Interpretation of RQ2 Themes in Relation to Theoretical Frameworks and Literature

Interpreting Themes Emerging from Research Question 2:	Relationship to Literature
How does the institutional context and culture shape each community college's strategies and outcomes?	
…with	
Supportive Community Leadership	● Strategic Responses (Lattimore et al., 2012) ● CRL Domain (Jones et al., 2016) ● Two-Year Thompson Scholar Learning Community (Hallett et al., 2020) ● Addressing Equity Gaps (Ziegler et al., 2021)
A Culture of Explanation and Comparison	● Biopower & Discourse (Foucault, 1980) ● CRL Domain (Jones et al., 2016) ● Addressing Equity Gaps (Ziegler et al., 2021)
The Rural Rapid Response	● Strategic Responses (Lattimore et al., 2012) ● CRL Domains 1 &5 (Jones et al., 2016) ● Addressing Equity Gaps (Ziegler et al., 2021)

Conclusions: New Discoveries Across Cases

The Importance of Narrative and Structural Humility

Black community college presidents and executive leaders are important members of senior leadership at each of the institutions participating in this study. These executive leaders not only serve as increased representation but must be given room to use their voice in discourse within and external to the campus community, having access and liberty to resources when serving racially minoritized students. While non-Black community college presidents and executive leaders are effective in supporting and pushing forward equity initiatives for Black

student success, these culturally conscious leaders must be aware of their own biases and privilege, leveraging them for the benefit of and the amplification of the voices of Black students, employees, and community members. This is referred to as narrative humility (Woolsey & Narruhn, 2018). They must also present a clear, consistent, public message that marginalized populations require and will receive more intentional and resourced structures of support that elevate their needs. Woolsey and Narruhn (2018) referred to this as structural humility. As a caution when addressing Black student success, a focus on fairness for all is a slippery slope toward the status quo or, worse, failure to serve racially minoritized students at all.

Socio-Political Savviness: An Essential Skill

The extent to which community college presidents and executive leaders use their influence within the organization to identify and remove barriers for Black students is often impacted by their ability to work within a charged socio-political environment. Presidents, in particular, must have the ability to exhibit and maintain a high level of inter-relational diplomacy while communicating the authentic and, many times, urgent needs of their most vulnerable students. Community college presidents and executive leaders who are unapologetic about identifying and addressing racial and other inequities have seen the most narrowed equity gaps and overall student success rates in retention.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations with the cross-case study design that are in line with Creswell and Creswell (2018). Given the number of eligible institutions and the requirement of on-site interviews, the researcher's resources, both in time and feasibility, were limited. This played a factor in the participating colleges based on distance from the researcher. The furthest research site was 3 ½ hours away and the closest was 45 minutes from the researcher's home

base. Another limitation is inherent to cross-case analysis. The more cases the researcher studied, the less in depth any single case analysis can be, particularly using secondary data sources like field notes and document or content analysis for triangulation. To address these limitations, the researcher stretched the length of the study, allowing more time between each site visit to begin analysis of that individual case.

Although quantitatively, the three community colleges demonstrate successful outcomes in narrowing equity gaps between white and Black students in the measure of first-to-second-year retention, other equity gap success measures such as graduation rates, transfer rates, and types of credentials earned were not evaluated as part of this study. With an asset-based lens, this study sought to examine community college environments in one state's system that had longitudinal data on retention and persistence outcomes. The roles and practices of community college presidents and executive leaders within the context of their rural or urban institutions are only one qualitative element of the community college environment. This study did not qualitatively focus on the perspectives and experiences of other members of the campus community, such as staff, faculty, board members, community leaders, or students.

Due to the criteria set for participation in identifying eligible community colleges with a narrowed equity gap of $\leq 6\%$ over the defined five-year period, none of the larger or urban community colleges were eligible to participate. The larger urban community colleges may serve more Black students (headcount), and although the gap between white and Black students in the student retention measure is larger than 6%, they may have narrowed the gap by larger percentage parameters.

Implications for the Field and Future Research

        This study is significant in that it provides further insight into the ways in which community college presidents and executive leaders use their influence to identify and remove barriers to Black student success in the measure of student retention. Keenly focused on the equity gap between white and Black students in both rural and more urban geographies, this study draws much-needed attention to the need for developing culturally relevant leadership skills for executive professionals in higher education settings, particularly community colleges. This work contributes to existing knowledge that addresses equity in K-12 classrooms and administrative support and extends the need for a more robust P-20 education and workforce alignment agenda in the United States as a global competitor.

Implications for Practitioners and Policy Makers

        The findings are relevant to community college leadership practitioners and policymakers looking for a theoretically sound framework as an everyday north star to determine how to deploy limited resources and maneuver astringent state and federal regulations for the greatest impact on student success. This study is one of the first to shed a contemporary light on the contentious issue of statewide banning of formal DEIJ (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Justice) initiatives and can serve as a backdrop for research scholars to investigate the effects of Statewide policy and funding restrictions on community college RMS' success and the state's education attainment and workforce goals. By providing additional evidence at a specific point in time in the form of successful outcomes and case studies, this study provides a baseline for organizational models, hiring practices, funding models, policy structures, communication plans, marketing and recruitment efforts, as well as board and governance development.

Although these findings may not be applicable to every community college across the nation, with varied legislative mandates regarding diversity and equity initiatives at the time the study was published, community college presidents and executive leaders may find applicability within the individual case studies with determinants of common geographical location, institutional profiles, enrollment size, and other demographic characteristics that align with their institutions. Coupled with the professional acumen of community college leaders, more broadly, the implementation of the findings of this study could propel student success retention measures for RMS forward considerably.

Recommendations for Future Researchers

The questions raised by this study address both the internal and external contexts of America's "democracy colleges" (Diekhoff, 1950) and the roles and practices of its senior leaders as an impact on educational attainment for local and global workforce impact. The questions raised by this study are poignant to satisfy the scope of this research agenda. However, this research has brought to light many questions in need of further investigation.

- What would be discovered if a cross-national study was conducted, duplicated in other States across the country?
- What other positive student success measures could lead us to best practices in using the culturally relevant leadership framework (i.e., graduation rates, grade point averages, credentials earned, time to completion)?
- How would a geographical focus on urban community colleges in large cities impact the findings?
- Would including mid-level managers and directors yield new insights into leadership practices?

- How would student perceptions and experiences add to our understanding of the effectiveness of the practices led by community college presidents and executive leaders?

With community college student retention in North Carolina as the leading success measure that brought these community colleges to light, there is a need to explore the topic of culturally relevant leadership practices in the community college setting more broadly. Further studies regarding the impact of culturally relevant leadership practices and policy development on student success would be worthwhile and strongly recommended.

Conclusion

This cross-case analysis sought to determine how community college presidents and executive leaders use their influence to identify and remove barriers to Black student success within the context of their rural or urban geographies. With the student success measure of first-to-second-year retention as a focus, through semi-structured interviews, observational field notes, and document analysis, seven themes emerged in response to the guided research questions. Internal to the three campus communities experiencing success in narrowing equity gaps, community college president and executive leader practices include the incorporation of culturally relevant leadership domains. Although in alignment with the culturally relevant leadership framework, four new themes emerged, including Leading with Head and Heart, Communicating with Clarity and Consistency, Altering Policy Structures, and Leadership as Frontline Service. With the consideration of each community college's context and relationship to its external environment, three additional themes emerged: Supportive Community Leadership, A Culture of Explanation and Comparison, and The Rural Rapid Response. The community college presidents and executive leaders clearly see the need to continue the development of their culturally relevant leadership skills to serve a very diverse student

population that will prove to be essential contributors to our local, national, and global

workforce.

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APPENDIX A: NC COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM DASHBOARD

First-Year Progression/Persistence by Race/Ethnicity (excluding dual enrollment) First-Year Progression/Persistence (PM4) - Institutional Outcomes | NC Community Colleges
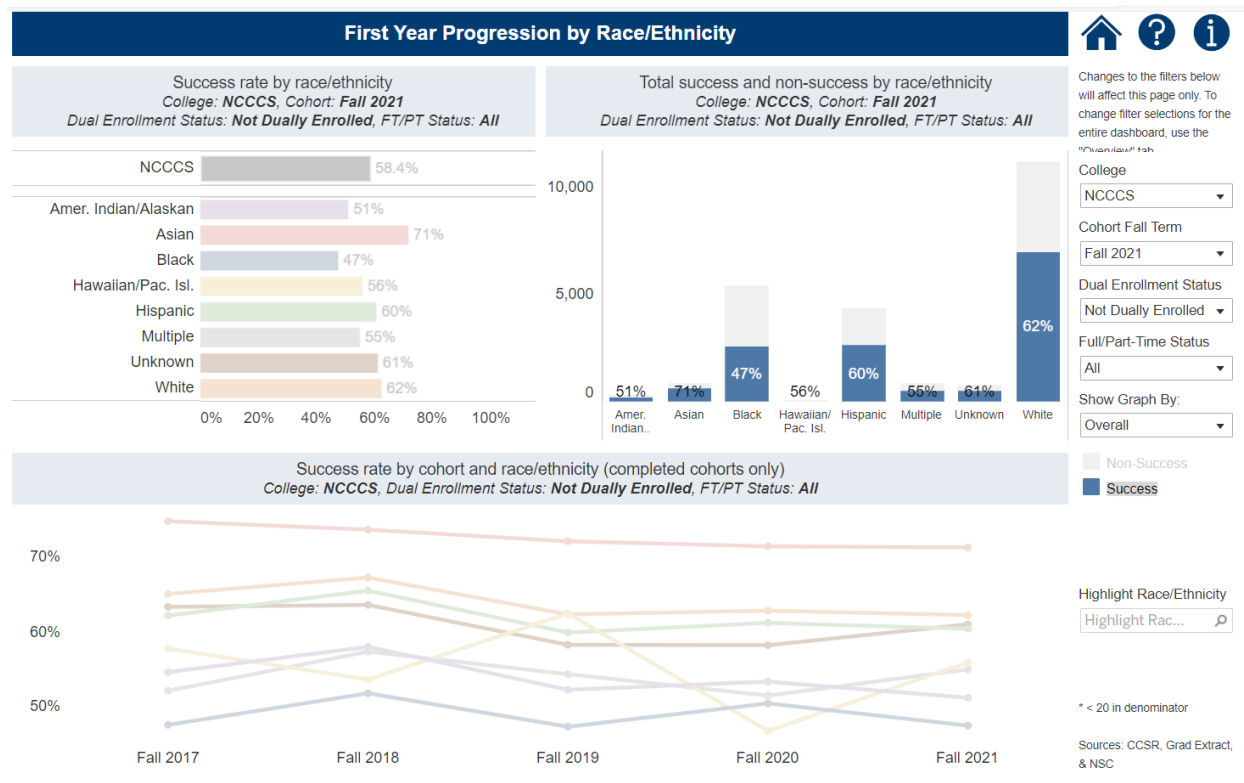
APPENDIX B: ELIGIBLE INSTITUTIONS AND INITIAL CRITERION

Eligible Community Colleges	Collegewide Persistence Rate Persistence = Fall to Fall continuous enrollment (2021)	(Fall 2021 Cohort) Equity Gap in Persistence Rate Black and White Students	(Fall 2016 Cohort) Equity Gap in Persistence Rate Black and White Students	Fall 2021 Cohort- Headcount (not including dually enrolled students)
CC- Z	67.1%	6% gap Black students-63% White students-69%	12% gap Black students-54% White students-66%	2,488
CC-Y	59.2%	5% gap Black students-56% White students-61%	9% gap Black students-59% White students-68%	1,775
CC-X	50.8%	5% gap Black students-40% White students-45%	33% gap Black students-42% White students-75%	991
CC-W	60.8%	5% gap Black students-58% White students-63%	19% gap Black students-52% White students-71%	807
CC-V	50.7%	4% gap Black students-44% White students-48%	18% gap Black students-44% White students-62%	524
CC-U	53.8%	3% gap Black students-53% White students-	5% gap *Black students-71% White students-	1,160

Eligible Community Colleges	Collegewide Persistence Rate Persistence = Fall to Fall continuous enrollment (2021)	(Fall 2021 Cohort) Equity Gap in Persistence Rate Black and White Students	(Fall 2016 Cohort) Equity Gap in Persistence Rate Black and White Students	Fall 2021 Cohort- Headcount (not including dually enrolled students)
		56%	66%	
CC-T	57.4%	3% gap Black students- 60% White students- 57%	20% gap Black students- 54% White students- 74%	910
CC-S	56.4%	2% gap Black students- 52% White students- 54%	9% gap Black students- 50% White students- 59%	1,833
CC-R	53.7%	2% gap Black students- 55% White students- 57%	27% gap Black students- 43% White students- 70%	1,365
CC-Q	52.4%	1% gap Black students- 52% White students- 53%	5% gap *Black students- 57% White students- 52%	1,735

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL & DATA COLLECTION MATRIX

Introductory Script

Let's get started. Thank you for accepting my invitation to participate and for inviting me to your campus. I'm Natasha Lipscomb, a doctoral candidate in the Curriculum and Instruction-Urban Education Ph.D. program at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Again, thank you for agreeing to be part of this study to explore the roles and leadership practices of the president and other executive leaders in three community colleges that successfully narrowed an equity gap and produced successful student outcomes in fall to fall student retention over the past five years.

As I mentioned in the consent form, this interview should take 30 minutes (no more than 45 minutes). There are a total of ten interview questions. Follow-up questions may be asked based on the responses given. If you would like to skip any question I ask, come back to it, or take a break, please let me know. Also, I will be selecting a pseudonym for your college (example: Oak Community College). Do you have a particular pseudonym you would like me to use for you as an individual when transcribing this interview?

Ok, [Use Pseudonym]. Before we start, I want to ask if you have any questions regarding the interview process? [pause intentionally]. Great! Let's get started. If you're ready, I will begin recording now.

Interview Questions	Possible Follow-Up Question(s)

RQ1- How do community college executive leaders use their influence to identify and address barriers for Black students?

Member-Checking
For the audio recording, please state your name (pseudonym), title, and years of experience as a community college executive and the number of years at this community college.

1. Describe the equity and diversity initiatives at your Community College.

2. What personal beliefs, values, and experiences do you hold that contribute to your commitment to advancing more equitable practices at your college?

What do the words *equity* and *justice* mean to you as a community college executive leader?

3. In what ways do you gather feedback from Black students, faculty, and staff about their experiences?

How often do you do this?

If not clear: What did you do to gather the ideas, opinions, and perspectives of the campus community?

What success stories or interactions with Black students are most memorable to you?

4. Which policy changes do you believe have had the most impact in creating

Have there been any changes to academic

Interview Questions	Possible Follow-Up Question(s)
successful outcomes for Black students in student retention (fall to fall continuous enrollment)?	program point systems, grade forgiveness or academic probation, placement tests, program rules for dress and hair, campus signage with implicit messages, use of campus spaces, etc.? Any changes in the areas of (1) prioritizing larger class sizes and fewer credit sections; (2) investing in an academic assistance program for low-income students; and (3) commitment to an increased percentage of full-time faculty? (Wassmer & Galloway, 2023)
5. What resistance did you find in operationalizing new or updated policy and practices?	From whom? And why? What do you see as the most challenging aspects of creating change in the community college setting?
6. What advice would you give other community college presidents and	How should community college

Interview Questions	Possible Follow-Up Question(s)
executive leaders who are working toward closing equity gaps?	leaders celebrate progress while continuing to challenge the status quo to address issues of equity?

RQ2- How does the institutional context shape each institution's strategies and outcomes?

Interview Questions	Possible Follow-Up Question(s)
7. Each community college is unique. What characteristics of this community college (location, size, urban, rural, political landscape, etc.) shape the way you strategically lead change for equitable student success?	
8. Who are the key external stakeholder groups to your college that impact the way you lead equity and diversity initiatives?	
9. What recommendations do you have for other community college executive leaders whose equity gaps are much wider than yours?	
10. Which college documents (strategic plan, diversity & equity plan, annual reports, presidents' messages, etc.) best communicate the college's commitment to equity?	May I have copies of these to use for further discovery? (Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained- not be used in an identifiable way)

RQ3-What are the key commonalities and differences across the institutions?

No interview questions. This research question will be addressed through the researcher's thematic analysis.

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPTS

Dr. Bass- Do Justice Community College

Researcher (00:00):

Okay. Thank you again, Dr. Bass for talking with me. Can you describe the equity and diversity initiatives here at your community college?

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (00:11):

Yes, I can. And thank you for being here. I'm glad to answer your questions. So our equity and inclusion council really is the result of several years of work, and I would describe it as having started in about 2014, and I may be getting into other questions you have here, but it started in 2014 out of a real strong desire that I had as president to work through some things that were causing unnecessary, maybe angst amongst our faculty and staff. And the real realization by myself that our greatest strength does lie in our diversity. And if we can be doing the things that embrace our diversity, then we'll be a better institution. And that's kind of how it all started. And it has evolved tremendously since that point to way beyond that. So we began the process of really taking some really hard looks at ourselves, a hard look at ourselves, having some real candid conversations amongst faculty and staff to try to work through some, I think things that were causing some dysfunction.

(01:27):

And really, because we worked with some consultants that were very helpful in helping us navigate those things, I knew we could not do it alone. We had to have help. And so we began the process of having really candid conversations with each other about our history, working with each other, working with the community. And that was a very therapeutic process I think for me as a leader, but also for the college as a whole and walking through and talking through really who we are and what we're about. But it was really what really began to happen. And it truly, I think still is the fundamental theme is a better understanding for each other. And we might not agree with each other, we might not necessarily be doing this outside of any other situation, but developing an understanding I think leads to a certain level of appreciation.

(02:38):

And then through that appreciation, you begin to want to get along better and develop empathy or sometimes sympathy. And that's really kind of where it all started from. It has evolved to the point where I think we're much better. There's an open dialogue on campus. I don't sense that tension. I don't sense that we, certainly, we're like any organization and we have our levels of dysfunction, any organization does, but around those types of things, I think there's less dysfunction because we have a better understanding of who we are, certainly as individuals, but as a campus too. And I think that for me was what I liked the most about the process. Now, what that means today is that we have a really, I think strong equity and inclusion council, which does a lot of work to help continue to foster those understandings. And we've really evolved, I think, into an institution that really is about equity as far as our students and opportunities. And although we might not be doing everything we can to equalize all opportunities, we're able to have conversations about it. And those conversations certainly with me are open and candid, and I think that's kind of the perception of how we operate as an institution amongst ourselves and

how we work in the community. I don't know if that answers your question about where we are, but that's how we got to where we are.

Researcher (04:27):

You mentioned 2014. When did you begin as president here?

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (04:36):

I began as president in 2012. I had been on campus as the vice president for instruction and then executive vice president since 2005. And my predecessor had done a fantastic job of creating the dialogue and the understanding for working better with each other. And this to me was just a natural next step for me as the president, but I just felt like it was something we had to do. And I mentioned the processes we went through. It was, and I've used a quote that always came to me. We became very comfortable with having uncomfortable conversations. And I think you've heard that maybe said in other scenarios or other settings, but that was very important for me and I think very important for the college. So that served as the foundation to where we are today with the Equity and Inclusion Council.

(05:47):

And I still feel very confident about being able to do that with people. And I just think that's kind of a culture that we've kind of created and are beginning to create. And I think our students do sense that. And it was very important to me that all these initiatives reported directly to me. Dr. Balance reports directly to me and all of the work that the equity inclusion council does, it's not something that's, I mean, it comes from my office. And I think that was important for me. And I think that has lended itself to it being successful and it really truly is equity and all the opportunities that we provide our students. And it has served as the foundation in many respects for our strategic planning process and how we recruit students. So I think those are some very good aspects that have kind of been the result of this.

Researcher (06:56):

So there are some words that have become words that we're not supposed to use in our State in public higher education. When you think about your personal values and beliefs, those things that make you the leader you are, what part of you, what are those values that contribute to the way you have led these initiatives?

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (07:26):

Well, I want people to get along. That's not realistic, but every chance we can get to make that happen, I think that's important. And I think that creates an environment for our employees to, I think if we can create an environment that if nothing else fosters a certain level of empathy, we are not going to always get along. And this work is never done. I mean, it's a constant effort, but it was important for me that we have a better level of understanding of each other so that we could get along better at whatever that meant. And then that I think leads to a better learning environment for students. And again, that work is never done and that we are always working towards it, but that's kind of where it came from for me. I just wanted us to get along and we don't always get along and I know that, but I felt like we could be doing a little bit better than where we were.

(08:31):

I just felt like there was kind of an undertone of misunderstanding and some anger that we needed to work through. And there's always going to be those things, but if we were creating processes and a level of openness that makes it a better place to work. And I think if your faculty and staff are feeling comfortable with where they work, they're going to perform better and hopefully model that to students. And I think that translates into how students learn and how well they learn. And I think that contributes to their ultimate success as a student. That's kind of the thought process that I've had.

Researcher (09:13):

And that makes so much sense in alignment with your journey in higher education as a VP of instruction, understanding what's happening in the classroom, how that translates into success. You mentioned the process. Are there any particular policies that have changed during this time or processes that have changed that impact students that you feel like really have been something that would be a best practice?

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (09:48):

I can speak to what I think have been best practices for us now. What we've done here at DJCC might not work anywhere else. I don't know. And I try not to worry about...we're doing what's working best for us and what works best for us might not work anywhere else. I think my belief is that so much of that work early on has led us to where we are as we think strategically and as we relate it to more specifically to student success. Again, I go back to wanting to make sure that the opportunities are equal as much as they can be. I think that work and the work that we've done with equity and inclusion has served as a really good strategic foundation for us. And there's any number of different things, such as how we do teaching and learning, how we work with our partners in the community, how we develop the programs that we develop, and how we make sure the college is relevant. I think that has served kind of as the foundation in the things that we do strategically.

Researcher (11:07):

Can you say more about making sure the college is relevant?

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (11:11):

Well, and this is a silly way to say it, but we want to make sure the feed's gettin' to the chickens.

(11:21):

And you've got to be thinking about that in real ways. And if there's barriers to that and if the college and how it operates and functions is part of that barrier, then that's not going to work well. So we don't want to be doing things that aren't going to serve our students as far as, I mean it's about gainful employment. Yes. Whether you're going on to a four year degree or you're just working on a two year or a certificate of some sort. Industry recognized certification. It's about employability. And we want our students to be economically mobile and if they're going to be economically mobile, they've got to be getting the things they need here that are relevant to them being able to do that.

Researcher (12:11):

And does that mean having the right kinds of programs or maybe something has been a staple program here for a long, long time, but if the students don't see that as relevant?

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (12:22):

Right. Well, I think we're embarking on or have been over the past year and a half now, some pretty significant program review processes that are going to help us determine that. But see, that's all being driven by the strategic plan, which has its roots in that work, that equity and inclusion piece. So if we're teaching something to a student in whatever program it is, and it's not going to be something that's going to help them in the end, if it's not relevant, then we really don't need to be putting our effort and our funds and so forth into that now. Now that's easier said than done sometimes because you have students that are interested in programs, but we need to try to be working towards that all the time and we've got to be making the effort, but it's got to be an effort that's driven by something. So that's kind of the thought process there.

Researcher (13:29):

Yes. Thank you. You mentioned the equity and inclusion council and very focused work that they're doing. Very close to you reporting directly so that you can hear. Are there other ways that you gather feedback from particularly Black students, Black employees, Black community members?

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (13:52):

Well, the president these days are often off campus more than they're on campus. And I certainly am that way. And so in every opportunity that I have to be in the community and to be amongst students, I'm certainly listening and hearing and listening and hearing, listening and paying close attention to what other people are saying. You have to certainly be aware of what's going on in your community. So I think the ears are, as I say, the ears are to the ground, but we've got good leadership here too that also are aware. I think that's another piece.

(14:41):

As we've had new people to join us, they're aware of what's important. And my leadership style is one that's very shared. It has to be and seek a lot of input. You've ultimately got to be responsible for the decisions you make, but they need to be well-informed. And I think I do believe, for the most part, the senior leadership team and the faculty and staff are aware that this is an important initiative for the college. It's certainly important to me. And I think that helps keep you grounded in paying attention to the needs of all of our students, whether whatever their background or wherever they're from. But yeah, I think it's a matter of creating that culture. And if you've got a culture that's in tune to that, then you're getting what you need to make sure you're being, again relevant.

Researcher (15:48):

What makes DJCC well-situated? When you think about location, size, geographical context. I don't know if we would call this an urban characteristic, because it's not quite rural, but what situates DJCC well to do this work?

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (16:12):

That's a great question. I think a lot about who we are. A lot of who we are today has been very evolutionary. And what I mean by that is the building that we're in right now, this college was started in 1852. This building was built with handmade bricks that were dried in the sun on this very site. So we have a long history and tradition of higher education in this County. We first were a female college transfer sister college to a neighboring liberal arts college. I've been told the history of which, I don't know if that four year college claims us, but we have that rich history of serving the community in that manner. We didn't become a community college until 1973. And so we have been traditionally seen as a college transfer institution and a large portion of our students still are college transfer students, as is the case with most community colleges.

(17:14):

But in the last 10 years, we've really come into our own as far as a workforce development engine and so forth. And if we think about who we serve, that's all of our County. We don't have any other counties adjacent to us that we serve. And in our County, there's great diversity within, for instance, if you're in the northern end of the county, it's agriculture and we lead the state in dairy production. You go south and you've got high-tech and high-wage, advanced manufacturing, technical manufacturing and all the things that you have in those areas. So we have a diverse county in that. So that has helped serve us. I mean, that's why we have ag programs, but we also have high tech programs. So there's diversity in what we offer because of the diversity of those we serve. So that theme, again, of understanding what started to be diversity is our greatest strength also I think is reflected in the county that we serve. So the way that we've developed the understanding for each other I think has helped us maintain a good understanding for those that we serve in the community.

Researcher (18:53):

Absolutely makes sense. What about the political landscape? Who are you as a college, talk a little bit about that and I think that ties into your greatest stakeholders in this work.

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (19:07):

Yeah. The great thing about I think any community college is because of all of the things that we do, the diverse things that we do, we have friends everywhere. We have whatever your political choosing is, whatever your party is, if you will. That's not an issue for us because we are doing so many good things for so many different people. And I think that can be said for just about every community college. That's the great thing about being in this, what I think is a service oriented job. We're doing things that we have an open door, and I know that's what we talk about in the community college system, but that's truly who we are. So it's very easy to maybe look for a better way to say it, very easy for us to have friends and all over the place. Now, are we always satisfying people?

(20:14):

No. We do things that upset people. Yes. Do we miss the mark on those types of things? Yes, but wanting everybody to get along, we do that as much as we can, but sometimes you get it wrong. But fundamentally what we do is serve everybody. Our service area is our County, so everybody in the County can benefit from what we're doing. And are we always serving everybody's needs?

No. But if we have the ability to understand and have empathy, then we're going to be okay. That may be an oversimplification.

Researcher (21:01):

I've already talked with Dr. Balance and listening to you, there's this pace and this rhythm of how you see this that serves as a consistent message.

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (21:14):

Yes, I believe that's in place. I do.

Researcher (21:18):

And so that's fascinating to me. I don't have a question written here, but wish I did. This is a semi-structured interview, but it's like I want to understand better your resolve there to be the pace sort of to do that, because this can be emotional work for lots of folks.

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (21:45):

And it is. And it can be. You're right.

Researcher (21:48):

So can you talk a little bit about your ability to beat that drum, to pace it and to keep the message consistent.

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (21:56):

Yeah, I've always thought about this as being a long game. Yeah. This is not, it's never one and done, and it's not a check the box. We check boxes, but we check the same boxes consistently or we change the boxes. So it's a long game. It's not, again, it's not a one and done. This is something that, it's that continuous loop of improvement and we backslide. Sometimes it's kind of that loop. That's just the way this works and it's an ebb and flow. I think for me personally, I'll get upset about things and I'll have to, okay, you're upset, put it to rest. I think as an institution, we get upset about things and we can get dragged into things. But if we go back to our greatest strength lies in our diversity, then diversity means a lot of different things. But we have to be an open door institution and we have to have, be able to shuck and jive. And as long as we're grounded and we know that people have their differences, and that it's okay to have differences. And we try our best to understand what those differences are. But if we're grounded in the student success and the empathy things, then we just, that's kind of where we have to fall. That's our fallback.

(23:40):

It is kind of like life. I don't know if I'm answering your question.

Researcher (23:45):

For you. Back to the values. That's how you live.

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (23:48):

We get it right sometimes and we don't get it right. We have our good days and we have our bad days, but that's an organization. I often talk about the college, and the life of the college. This is what we're living and being. So it is the life of the college. And for me, that works for me. And I use that. We're a living thing.

Researcher (24:21):

The life of the college. How often does your campus community hear from you?

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (24:29):

So we have regular bi-monthly meetings, just open faculty/staff assemblies, but it's a virtual assembly. And I write monthly in our Campus Chronicle about certain events on campus and so forth. And I'm on campus quite a bit. I mean, I'm out and about, so I hope that people feel like they're hearing from me on a regular basis. I do, as I said, I do write a monthly, we have the Campus Chronicle that just highlights things and I always am writing something in there about what's going on and so forth. And I do keep an open door, literally. And so I feel like I'm in touch, but I'm sure it's an important part about doing this kind of job.

Researcher (25:18):

A little bit more about who you see as your biggest stakeholders and supporters in your role for the equity initiatives you have going on.

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (25:29):

Well, I depend heavily on that council, on those that are on the committee. Dr. Balance does a great job of leading that. She does a really good job of letting them do things that they need to do. Our Board is very supportive of that. I keep the board well-involved and Dr. Balance reports out to 'em regularly. They're certainly behind these initiatives. I think what that council has also done is, I do believe that people in the community, organizations in the community lean on us for some things, which is fantastic. I think people know that we're doing a good job in that realm, which really is the realm of the college. It's how we function. I think people see that in the community. And again, it's not a perfect process. We're not a perfect organization, but I think that's helped us to be, people see that in the community, and we've made connections in the community that we might not have made before.

(26:35):

I think at this campus site, and we have another campus site, there's some serious need that's literally within a stone's throw. I mean, if you could stand on the back corner of the property, you could throw a stone. And there's some serious need in our community. And I think that's a thing that we never seem to get that right. It's a constant and it's engaging and reengaging. And what I like about what I think when we talk about opportunity and equalizing the opportunities, and I think you know much enough about what our mission and vision is for equity and inclusion, that so much of the work that we do and continue to work on that work is never done, is helping people realize that where they are in their lives might not be the best place that they can be and that they deserve better and we can help them get better.

(27:38):

And sometimes that's the simplest thing. I think about some of the poverty levels that we see locally. Wealth for a lot of people is simply being able to pay your bills and have pizza on Friday night for your family, and how can we, through what we're doing as an institution, help people realize that or that their total shutdown and unemployment and a total bankruptcy is just one car repair away, and how can we better serve those communities here. So I think there's things there from the empathy pieces of our equity inclusion council is something we've got to continue to work on. As I said, the work is never done, and we sometimes struggle with where to begin. You're in the community college system as well, and one of the things that we all struggle with is there's so much work to be done. We've got to focus on what it is we're going to do. We can't do it all, but where do we focus? And sometimes it's the kind of paralysis by analysis we spend all this time looking for, Where do you begin?

Researcher (29:10):

Well, you definitely aren't definitely mobile through this work. And like you said, it's a long haul. Dr. Balance shared with me three years worth of reports from the equity, and she highlighted some things for me, and part of my data gathering is document analysis as well. And so I'll be looking at those. I saw even some professional development around pedagogical type practices that are aligned.

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (29:41):

We're trying to make sure it's in our classroom, and it's how people learn. What's the best way to learn? And that's an access thing. It's our hiring function. I think you'll see that it's pretty embedded. And it's what I like about it too is it is not when you see what we're doing. Oh yeah. We should all be doing that. Oh yeah, that really makes sense. Regardless of what connotation may come with the term equity and inclusion, I think when you see what we're doing, it's very practical and it makes sense. Yes. And it's something we're trying to do and everybody should try to do their very best.

Researcher (30:32):

You answered my next question a while ago, and then again, it's here about other community colleges and of course that leadership will be dictated by what the community needs. That's what we do in community colleges. But what recommendations would you have for community college leaders? I'm interviewing presidents and executive leaders, those who report to them, who say, my gosh, I mean your equity gap is 6% or less than ours is 25%. What advice would you give?

Dr. Bass, President of DJCC (31:07):

First of all, for me, it started because of some just personally not being comfortable. And I can't speak to that with any president. I would just say that this, again, started with your greatest strength is your diversity. And what that really became to me is you really got to know, you've got to develop an understanding for each other. And it really is simple for me through understanding comes appreciation. Appreciation comes from wanting to preserve and protect. And that's more of a natural resource management kind of approach. But that's where I draw that from.

(31:54):

I think that's something we should all be trying to do, not preserve and protect, but understand so that we can move forward together. I can only speak to what we did here and what worked for us. And it did start with just personally feeling uncomfortable about what I sensed and the unrealistic desire to want everybody to get along.

(33:20):

Yeah. Thank you Dr. Brewer.

Dr. Balance- Do Justice Community College

Researcher (00:01):

Thank you again for participating in the research project. My first question is if you would describe the equity and diversity initiatives here at Do Justice Community College (DJCC).

Dr. Balance (00:14):

Okay. So for clarification, do you want me to go backwards or where we are now?

Researcher (00:19):

The current Diversity and Equity initiative.

Dr. Balance (00:21):

Alright, so the current initiative, I would say we're wrapping up a three year cycle of our 2020 equity and inclusion strategic plan that we created in 2020. And so actually we're wrapping up our fourth year, I guess I should say, because we have three reports and I actually have copies of them that you can take with you today. It may or may not be more than you need, but we had a 2021 report, 2022 and a 2023 report, and so this year would actually be our fourth year, but there's a switch to it and I'll explain that. But from our 2020 plan, we came up with two major goals and four objectives under each, so eight objectives total that we wanted to work on.

(01:18):

And when I say we, my position, as director of equity and inclusion is under the purview of the president. We meet once a month and we review everything that's going on that month or what's coming or what just happened and things that have come up since then. And so he and I kind of had this conversation early on and then very quickly included not only the Equity and Inclusion Council who were already in place at that time, but then also the leadership of the college. And part of our goal with this was to get this to a place where it was not just a committee or a council or one person doing all this that it really was college-wide. And so, that was one of the reasons for doing this strategic plan in 2020 was that we really wanted to start bringing everybody in because up to that point we were doing a lot, but I feel like it was kind of the same people doing the same things.

(02:26):

And so to gain ownership across the whole college from all divisions and all departments and all of the administration was a crucial part of this to us. And so there are parts of the strategic plan that tie into everybody, and so that was a big part of what we did. The reason I said it's a little different right at this very moment is that the college created a new strategic plan this academic year, 23-24. And one of the goals of that strategic plan for the overall college is that we wanted to absorb the equity/inclusion strategic plan into the college's new strategic plan. And so some of the verbiages are the same, some of the intent is the same. And so while we have these three reports that I'll give you today from the 2020-2021 school year to this past spring, what we do this year may or may not look a little different because we're not just speaking to those eight objectives for the equity and inclusion strategic plan. We're talking about the college strategic plan. And that was also another part of the goal is that we would be reaching to the point where this is just a part of who we are and what we do. And it's not just this one little thing on the shelf that is something for everybody and it's just a part of who we are.

Researcher (03:59):

Awesome. Now your role, how long have you been here at DJCC and been in this role?

Dr. Balance (04:05):

So, I came to DJCC in 2005 as an adjunct music instructor. I became full-time. And then I became the director of equity and inclusion, but had been working in the DEI area for several years before that here at the college.

Researcher (04:37):

Yeah. Thank you for clarifying that. Yes. Yeah. So maybe as part of the plan, or if it's not directly in the plan, can you talk about the ways that you gather feedback from Black students, faculty, staff, employees, and hear about their experiences?

Dr. Balance (04:56):

Yeah, so I would say that's a constant work in progress. I mean, I don't know that we're ever done with that. We have student surveys that the college does yearly and we go through all of that data. Some of that data you'll see in the end of year reports. I tried to make a point of going out and meeting with students. I would go to SGA meetings, I would go to safe club meetings. I would go to just various things. We have the Man-to-Man program, the male minority program. I would go there. So I would try and go out and talk to students as much as possible and have some of those casual conversations to kind of see where things were. So I would say it was a mixture of those casual conversations, the qualitative and quantitative data that we got from the student surveys and then also the faculty/staff surveys at the end of each year.

(05:54):

We would go through all of those and we started incorporating more DEIB questions into those surveys through the years so that we could gain more of that feedback. Another thing that we have is we have an EIC email that we've tried to be clear to the campus community that anybody can email that, use that specific email at any time or mine, but sometimes I think they feel more comfortable using the EIC email and they know that reaching out and asking questions or having concerns that that's anonymous and that we will take that and speak to that and we will report back on it. And so that's been a wonderful thing, too. And I think just also just kind of word of mouth, just letting people know that again, this is who we are, this is what we're doing. And this is one of our big challenges has been-diversity is not one thing.

(06:53):

And so we've really tried to cover the broadness of this and the breadth of this and that when there's a question or a concern or anything that they can come to me or anybody on EIC. And I've had some private conversations where people have called me or come to me or something and said, can I talk to you off the record? So just trying to build trust took time and to create an atmosphere where I think people feel like they're heard, and not only that they're heard, but that something's going to happen because they were heard

Researcher (07:33):

So you mentioned the quantitative and the qualitative data. Here I have just a snapshot from the State's Community College system dashboard, and I'm looking at the progression of Black student persistence rates from fall to fall, from 2017 through the most recent data that they have made available- fall of 2021. And again, you all fell in the eligible criteria for colleges that I deemed successful, which had less than a 6% gap in the persistence rate between Black and white students. And you can see here, black students indicated in the blue and white students indicated in orange. The other eligible piece is your overall persistence rate of 56.4, which we would all love to be higher, but it is above the average of the community college system, and I'm sure you're well aware of this data and these successful outcomes. This does not include any dual enrollment/Early college. So congratulations on this. I mean, if I could show you the comparisons for the other colleges, it really is in the top tier, my question is what do you think led to this? If you could share with me any policy changes or any practices that you believe are unique to your college that led to these successful outcomes, what would you highlight?

Dr. Balance (09:15):

Yeah, I get a little emotional thinking about it because it's been a lot. It's really been a lot. I think when we started this work, back in 2013-2014, and really got serious about this and decided what this was going to be, we always talked about more than checking the box, right?. And when we made this decision; I have to give a lot of credit to Dr. Bass because you can't do this without the administrative support. I mean, I have to say that, because it's just not going to happen. I talked to people around the state and when that's not there, you're just running up against a wall. We also wouldn't be where we are without the extensive work of the Equity and Inclusion Council.

Their tireless efforts, representing all areas of the college, have made the difference in our progress. Their subcommittees- the Resource Team, the Curriculum Infusion Team, and the Events and Planning Team, are constantly expanding the campus engagement. They have been the leaders here on campus in this effort and through their rotating years of service have become a large population of our College.

Dr. Balance (10:23):

So, I think when we made that decision early on, that this was going to be a part of who we are, it was a lot those first few years, it was a culture change. And I try to share with folks when I'm talking about this work that this is not an overnight thing. This is not a, we're going to fix this today. This is a really long-term project, and the culture shift that has to occur is emotional and it's hard. And those early years, I feel like we'd have sessions and things and there would be tears and there would be anger, and there would be this and that. And I think it takes time. And I think one of the things I try and share with folks is you've got to remain in a space of hope and you've got to remain in a space of, I mean, to me, hope is different than optimism. Hope is more powerful. And so I feel like residing in that space of what can we do right now? And we're going to do all we can today, and then we're going to come back tomorrow and we're going to do the same thing. And I think you have to start from that place. And you can't let the frustration or the disappointment or the enormity of it overwhelm you. And you have to take those small steps. And you have to know that for today, those small steps are enough.

(12:20):

I think about how to answer that question because I feel like it's been a million things. I feel like it started with those baby steps, I talk about-always starting with training and dialogue on the foundational elements of unconscious bias and cultural sensitivity and empathy. And I mean, really you have to start from a place of looking out at your readiness levels in your community, and they're all over the place, right? So you have to start from this really foundational place of just building this vocabulary from the ground up and what do we mean when we're talking about this? And then you throw in everything that's happened in the last 10 years or so as far as political changes and cultural changes and just the divisiveness of what we've lived through in the last many years. So I think a lot of it is small steps.

(13:31):

I think a lot of it is speaking to the humanness of all of us. Years ago, we decided we need to really lay out our "why" and we need to be super clear about that and we have to repeat the Why for our community over and over. You have people that miss the messaging. You have people that are getting different messaging out in the world, and we need to be constantly consistently clear about why we're doing this. And when we step back and look at that, it really just comes down to student success and what we are doing to create equitable classrooms.

(14:30):

And so to answer your question for part of that, I would say some of it's been our professional development on equity in the classroom, and that could be a million different things. That could be things from, like we did a multi-year study on Tilt (Transparency in Learning and Teaching) and some different equitable classroom practices. We've done some work in universal design and learning (UDL), anything that can speak to faculty from the standpoint of looking at these practices, looking at these pedagogical methods that we know are proven to reduce equity gaps in the classroom. And knowing also that when you're creating something good like that for someone, for a student in your class, you're making the classroom better for everybody. And so getting that messaging across that you're really just creating better learning environments for everybody.

(15:32):

But again, I think getting to that point, it took steps to get to that. It took steps to get to the point where we could really start digging into the classroom and then beyond the classroom. I would also have to say that when you start getting into the staff side of this and the administrative side of this, that was a part of this whole process. It is about faculty. Absolutely. But it's also about everybody else. Everyone that steps foot on this campus or one of our other campuses has a responsibility in this and has a responsibility for making sure that our students feel like they belong. And that not only do they belong, but they're needed and their voice is needed and what they can do for our college is needed and what they can do for our world is needed. And so it's big. And that's been a part of just that consistent message throughout. The representation from the EIC has really advanced this.

Researcher (16:33):

So I almost missed this question. I've got to go back to it because of how you are depicting and how you're sharing. I want to talk about you. There's something unique. Okay. What personal beliefs or values or experiences or what, I mean you're department chair for music program, you're director of equity and inclusion here, odd combination and...And what personal beliefs, values, and experiences do you hold that you believe contribute to the way you have led in advancing equitable initiatives here?

Dr. Balance (17:15):

Yeah. Well, I mean, I would say I am a person of faith, and I would say that's a big part of this for me, just my, I don't know... I talk a lot about love in this work, and I know in the early years I remember being in sessions and talking about love, and I would have to kind of preface that by saying, this is a culture shift for us to be in higher education and talking about love. And still, even today, sometimes out there in higher ed, it's kind of like, why are you talking about love? It feels very flowery and it's not intellectual enough for higher education or whatever, but it's about love. I mean, it really is what it comes down to for me. And I don't know, I feel like really simply put, I think justice is a part of my faith.

(18:16):

And so to me, it's all connected. And interesting enough, I think the fact that I come from a music background also, I think it lends itself very well to this work because in the arts, we kind of grow up in a space of honor and welcome and inclusion. And I feel like we kind of move through this space of, it's about the music and it's about the humanness of that. And my music education background is a part of that also, that my philosophy is music is for everyone. And so it's, to me, it's all connected. It's hard to separate it all. I don't know if that answered your question.

Researcher (19:08):

Absolutely. For sure. For certain.

(19:10):

You are the best person to answer the question about how you come to this work.

(19:18):

And I think it shows up in a genuine, authentic way when you can describe it that way. So thank you for sharing that. Thank you so much. Each college is unique. And I'm interested in, you touched on a little bit about the political landscape, things changing, how, if you could talk a little bit about that for your college, even the location, the size of the college, rural, urban kinds of things, any of that spark some ways that shaped how you all have done this over the years?

Dr. Balance (19:59):

Yeah, yeah, that's an interesting question. And again, I feel like that you could go many different directions with that. Our county that we serve is this long, skinny county. At the south end, you've got a lot of folks that work in the neighboring large city. It is a little more of a transplant area. It has a little bit more of a, even though it's still a small town, there are a lot of people from all over the world really in that area. It feels very Big-city adjacent. And then you migrate up through all of the little towns, and we've got this historic college. And then you keep going up and you have this whole world of agriculture and land and space.

(20:55):

We serve diverse students. And it's interesting, really, honestly, and I think, again, that-all of this is a work in progress, but I think that's absolutely another piece of this that's a work in progress because we serve so many different students from so many different backgrounds and childhood experiences. I will say that I think our town is steeped in history.

(22:07):

But at the same time, we have this community that has embraced this concept of higher education and growth in its community and this idea of lifelong learning and this idea of the betterment of our community. And I feel like we've been very fortunate with not only our administration, but also really in a lot of ways with our board of trustees and the way that that

has run through the years and our mayor and his inclusion of the community. And I feel like in some ways it was kind of the right people at the right time. It just all kind of came together at the right time and the right voices were here. I think around the same time that we were kind of kicking all of this off, we had a group in the area called Partnership for Equity, we were doing a lot of racial equity training in the community, and it was higher ed, the medical profession, the K 12 system, Clergy, nonprofits and law enforcement. And we were all in these sessions together. And DJCC was a part of that. But that was a community organization that kind of, several of us kind of got together and helped with. I'm very grateful that I feel like it was kind of the right place, the right time to get this going. And we had the support to do it.

Researcher (23:52):

Okay, let's go here. So how has that changed with some of the state session law about what can and can't be part of higher education?

Dr. Balance (24:00):

When all of that came through, even before the most recent legislation when the higher ed systems in our State were asked to document everything we had done over the past three years, every dime we had spent on anything for this, every session we had done, who was involved, what was it called? All of that. And we had done a little bit of everything.

(24:53):

We had a meeting with the president's council about it. We sat down and Dr. Bass was like, we're being asked to provide this. We're going to provide it. Let's write it all down. And it was quick. The state said, we want this now. And we had to put it together in a matter of days, literally. And so I'm pulling everything down and we created this big document. We included a huge series at that time on racial equity, and it was called Beyond Diversity Building Racial Justice. And it was a series of three sessions built together, and we did it for all different groups all over campus.

(25:45):

And it ran for a couple of years, I went back and met with the president's council, and that was it. It was so matter of fact. There was no secrecy, there was no hiding. Honestly from a college standpoint, we had all of this data. It was a great time to look at everything and be like, wow, I'm so proud of us.

(26:49):

And I think a lot of us felt that way, looking at it like, wow, we've done so much. And it was kind of exciting. And then the most recent stuff with what you can and what you can't talk about, again, it was very matter of fact. It was like, all right, this is where we are now.

(27:45):

And honestly, once we started going through all of it, the way that we do what we do here, we have tried to create this in such a way that honestly, it really didn't change a whole lot about what

we do. We looked at everything and we were like, okay, alright, okay, because we're not in the practice of going out and saying, I believe this, you should believe it too. That's not how we work. And so honestly, it really hasn't affected us that much, and I would say that's because of the way we do what we do. And there again, that's taken time. We're always considering people's readiness levels and we've talked on and on about dialogue and the art of dialogue.

(29:00):

And one of the pieces of that is we can bring everybody to the table and we can have dialogue, which is different than conversation, right?. We can say, what do you agree with? What do you disagree with? Tell me a little bit more about that. If this makes you uncomfortable, why do you think this makes you uncomfortable? Those kinds of things.

Researcher (29:41):

Absolutely.

(29:44):

So you talked about where this college is and moving forward with equity initiatives, what recommendations would you have for a community college who is looking and aspiring to see narrowed equity gaps that you all are seeing, their gaps are much wider than yours? What recommendations would you have for them?

Dr. Balance (30:11):

Yeah, probably some of what I've already said. I think I would say to you, there's got to be a starting place. And this is not overnight and this is not going to be, it is a lovely idea to think that you're going to do a session on equity in the classroom and you're going to fix it. But that's just not the reality. And the reality is it takes time and we're not done. I mean, I don't know that I know anybody that feels like they're done. This is every day. I mean, this is all the time. And so this data on our equity outcomes is wonderful, and it warms my heart and it makes me so happy for what we've done up to this point. But we're still going. This is every day and this is constant meetings and this is constant reading and this is constant research and this is constant dialogue.

(31:11):

So I would say a lot of patience, I would say start at the beginning. I'm a big fan of starting with those foundational elements. And again, you've got to build some bridges and get over any feelings about worrying what people are going to think or whatever. You've got to go have a session on empathy. You've got to go have a session on dialogue. You've got to have some of these sessions that people are going to think, why are we doing this? But they're needed. They're needed. And once you do them and you start getting into it, those light bulbs start going off and people start really realizing, oh, we did need that foundation of cultural responsiveness. And I would also say I'm happy to share stuff. There's no need to recreate the wheel.

(32:09):

And so I'm always happy to share some of those earlier things. Like I said, I keep everything. And so anybody that's ever asked, I'll say, yeah, absolutely. I'll send you stuff. Use it. Because I feel like we all do that and I feel like we should, because if I did something and you felt like, wow, actually that PowerPoint went pretty well, share it with some other people. This seemed to work. So it doesn't mean that that's going to work everywhere. And it doesn't mean that that's a piece of magic, but it just means it's one more thing that we can share. Because to me, this is a community effort and this is not about somebody winning and losing. This is about all of us winning. And so if something's working for somebody, I feel like it's our duty to share that with everybody and support each other because it's hard.

(33:02):

And in those early years, it's hard and you're going to have some sleepless nights and you're going to have some days where maybe things don't come out, and you are just going to have to have some conversations, and you're going to have to have a lot of grace for each other and yourself. We talk about that a lot too. You've got to really leave a lot of room for grace and compassion for yourself and for others, because when you start digging into some of this stuff, you can't really have a super productive session. If everyone is on eggshells and everyone's worried about, oh, I'm so scared, I'm going to say the wrong thing. Or I'm going to ask the wrong question. Ask the question. We need to get this out. There's a great TED Talk by a woman named Verna Myers, and you may have run across some of her work.

(34:01):

She's a DEI speaker, and she's worked with all these different corporations, but in one of her talks, she talks about how we've got to stop trying to be nice about all of this. We've just got to sit down and have conversations and we've got to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. I remember early on being in a session and us just getting comfortable with saying, okay, everybody's say, "black folk". Okay, everybody say, "white folk". Because it's like this discomfort that we've kind of built up, and we've got to get over that so that we can have some of these conversations.

Researcher (34:42):

Well said, well said. And thank you for being willing to share. It looks like I'm excited to see what you have. I got here and you had a folder of stuff for me already, and I was excited to see that. Thank you so much.

Dr. Balance (34:54):

Yeah, of course. Of course.

Dr. Melody- Do Justice Community College

Researcher (00:00):

Okay, let's get started. If you could, how would you describe the equity and diversity or equity and inclusion initiative here at Do Justice Community College?

Dr. Melody (00:13):

It's very present, or you can see it from the top down. When working with Dr. Bass, it means a lot to him as the president. And the fact that we've designated a position in Dr. Balance is important, and she does quite a bit of programming around campus, but also sends out information to the college about opportunities. So I've often felt since I've been here, if you want to do something, you can do something and you'll get the support of the president. And with the Equity and Inclusion Council, there's a place to at least share the ideas that you want. And then you have a group of people that will give you recommendations or give you ideas. And so you'll have the support of the college, and that may be an extension of this community. It is an interesting community in that the minorities in this community are looking for a way to help minorities rise up.

Researcher (01:48):

Okay. So, let's talk about the community and how it's unique. What do you think are the unique characteristics of this community? Because you have been at another community college and you have done the work of serving the community before. Are there any characteristics that you think so far that you see, when you think about size, location, the political landscape, what makes this college situated to do this work best?

Dr. Melody (02:25):

I think there's an openness amongst the minority faculty and staff who are here to do the work of helping minority students that are here. They also are very supportive of the programming that's here, but I've also noticed that they don't like it when someone's trying to take programming from them. So just an example, there was a switch in the way that we were going to do the MLK program, and it just happened to be a white person who was facilitating this change, but he gave the overall view of the program to a couple of people who were not white but were black, and they were able to say, no, you don't need to do it that way, because this program is depended upon by the community and community members come out. But he was moving towards a more service oriented one, which is not a bad idea, but he forgot that the community also depended on the annual MLK program. And so the community here, although small, I mean I think there are 70 faculty members who are black and that's faculty, staff and work study students. And so

Researcher (04:06):

70 and do you know how many total?

Dr. Melody (04:10):

I don't know the number of all the employees, but yeah,

Researcher (04:14):

That's 70 small.

Dr. Melody (04:16):

It's still a small number, but the ones that are here, they are committed to making sure that, of course they're helping minority students. So the community around DJCC still feels a little bit in the past. It's almost like they are still waiting for the green light to do certain things or they're really sensitive about, Hey, should we do this or should we not do this? But I felt like overall they don't miss an opportunity to celebrate the students here as a whole.

Researcher (05:10):

How do you think that plays out or is different for maybe a more urban community college, a larger one? How is that different?

Dr. Melody (05:28):

For me, having been in both an urban community college setting and a more rural community college setting, it seemed like there were more opportunities in the urban setting for urban students just because there were just more of them. And then there were more faculty and staff, and there was more financial resources and more programming. It may have been more surface there, where here you get to have a more intimate relationship with students, but it seemed like there were probably more resources at the larger urban campuses.

Researcher (06:15):

Okay. Let's talk a little bit about the way you lead. What personal values, beliefs, personal experiences, or professional ones that you have that sort of shape the way you bring leadership to your role? And as a black man in this role, what comes to mind?

Dr. Melody (06:47):

Well, I've always been a huge advocate for students. So one of the things that comes through is I'm going to put the student before anything. And so just talking to a financial aid specialist today who said, Dr. Melody, we know you want us to do whatever we can do for the student. So the student in terms of leadership is I want all staff in my area to know we go as hard and as long for the students as possible because we don't know if we're the last opportunity for that student because probably somebody has given up on that student, not necessarily at the college, but in their household or in their community. And if we can get 'em past a certificate or a diploma or a degree, we're changing generations. That child of that person that just completed would want for their child to have that and more.

(07:55):

And so that's the big component. The other component probably would be that a diverse staff is important for me, so I actively look for ways to recruit minority folk to the college, even if it's in a part-time role. And so since I've been here, maybe four or five minorities I've hired, and it's just because there weren't a whole lot in our areas to begin with. And so having to hire, especially males, I think there were no black males in this division when I got here. And now there's two black males, even though they are part-time, but a lot of that has to do with salary because you've got this county and you've got the nearby larger city. If you live in the larger city and you have to drive all the way to this county for a part-time salary, that's not good. So in terms of leadership, my big thing is to have a diverse staff. The other thing is that I want to help you to fail, if that makes sense.

(09:20):

In other words, I try to get student staff to stretch themselves so that if they fail, it's okay because they're trying something new and different. And so we'll work a whole lot with trying new things, studying what's already been done, modifying things that work for this community and for this staff, and really having the energy. Just having energy, because it takes a lot of energy. There's a whole lot of different personalities. What people don't see often is the fact that from where I sit and from where you sit, there's a bigger picture and getting other people to see that they're a piece of the puzzle, but not the whole puzzle. But if they do their piece very, very well, then that puzzle comes into view. And so that's really, really important. And then on the leadership team, this [conference space] is where we have our leadership meetings, and I'm the only minority here.

(10:34):

And so sometimes it's a struggle because there are conversations that are going on that I don't know what they're talking about, and it's not an academic or a skill level type of conversation, it's people they know. It's things that have happened over the weekend, those types of things. But I don't know those people because I'm not in those circles in terms of just hanging out. So when I'm in the leadership meeting here, I have to really market student services. I have to talk about things that they're not talking about just to put it on their radar. I have to engage in the conversations that even I don't want to engage in because I think we're spending too much time on it. But that's just my opinion on certain things. And then I've just got to be a presence to all of the folk in here. But I often wonder if the shoe was on the other foot and they were in here and there were four black people and one white person, how they would interact on a day-to-day basis. And it is not easy all the time, but it's not bad here, which is really good.

(11:51):

Like today, one of the things I did is our dean at the other campus is a black female. So I have her coming to this campus once a month. And so she'll come, she'll share her updates. So getting Black staff in front of other people around the campus to do things. And then for me, I don't mind just trying things period. And I think one of the things was the black faculty and staff lunch that I had last week. I think it ended up being about 30 of us there, which I thought was good. And many pulled me to the side and said, man, we've never done anything like this. I've been here 21 years, but this felt good. This felt like home. And so that makes a difference to me. And my message for them was, the better we are together, the better the student is in the college. We just have to make sure that when we congregate, we have all that in mind that it's positive. And so I think that would kind of describe my leadership.

Researcher (13:15):

Yeah, absolutely. You hit on something that goes into my next question here about your role, how you gather feedback from, and we've been using the term minority, but my study is really focused on Black students because of the narrowed equity gap. That's where we're seeing success here at your college. So how do you gather feedback from black students, black faculty, black staff, to know if attention is needed someplace and that sort of thing? So you mentioned the employees, but what about Black students?

Dr. Melody (13:57):

Last Wednesday I had a black male focus group. And so in that black male focus group, I used the process where I asked a question, they wrote their answer down on a card, an index card, they shared the information, and then we took up the card. And so for about an hour, we had four or five students there to grab the feedback. And so one of the things that really jumped out initially was involvement. There are several. When you're doing the focus groups, they're saying the same thing sometimes and a big thing that came in, I feel welcomed when I am involved and my involvement makes me feel welcome. And so one of the things that you learn from that is how do you really go back at the very beginning and capture the way that you can get students involved from the very outset, family, the family support, the whether or not my parents had a post high school degree or not makes a huge difference for us.

(15:20):

The other thing that came up is transportation, not in the sense that it was more than just transportation. It was not only how I was able to get here, but how confident I was that I'll get here consistently. And so if I can get there consistently, maybe I'll do it, but if I am not, maybe I won't do it or maybe I won't stay. And so the feedback I got was so rich from just that focus group. The other thing is I have a part-time position. I have her call black males throughout the semester and just do check-ins. And it's literally, Hey, this is Ms. Song. I'm calling just to see how you're doing, to see if you need anything. And that I've been doing for all three years, we just check in. And what we've noticed is that we'll find problems along the way just because of those calls we implemented, whether or not we could get them with a text.

(16:43):

And we've done that as well. The other thing is we always have some sort of kickoff at the beginning of each semester where we invite black males in particular and have some food, talk to them, kind of break the ice, let 'em know, Hey, there's a black male here, that's it. And there's a black female there. And then we have four community mentors who have been connected to the program, one in banking, one in marketing, one who's on the board of trustees, and one is an active community person. And they come and they're just there. I mean, sometimes they say things, sometimes they talk with students one-on-one, just there. And they have a commitment to the community. And so they give us feedback as well.

(17:46):

I think the other thing that blows me away that we don't really think about is the fact that for the MLK program, once the change was starting and I was able to jump in and kind of help, one of the things I said to them is, let's do this. Let's invite all the black males who were on the dean's list and their parents and tell them to come out. And so it was a nice opportunity for them to come out and their parents were so proud. And so we called them the Martin Luther King Jr. Dream achievers, and we simply had a 20-30 minute program. But instead of the college employees doing it, I found students to introduce the speaker to say the prayer, to lead the Black National Anthem, to do the closing. And right before whatever they did, they kind talked about who they were. Hi, I'm Jacob. I'm a sophomore. This is my second year. I'm majoring in culinary. And this is why I chose DJCC. And then I moved the venue instead of a huge auditorium, to a smaller, more intimate place.

(19:19):

And I think that was very helpful for intimacy. And then I got a local pastor to do the inspirational message and I said, Hey, 10 to 15 minutes is enough so we can celebrate these guys.

So he focused his message on what these young men needed to be thinking about moving forward, which was great. But what I found out is that half of them were 4.0 and 3.5 and 3.75 GPA students. That's the other thing. I mean, I knew we weren't going to get all of them that came, but let's say if there were 20, we got 10 to come, which was great, I thought. And their parents, so you're building the community because the community parents are getting to see something that DJCC is doing for black males, which is good. But then I'm telling you, half of those black males pulled me to the side, the ones that I did not know. And we started talking and I found out they were still at risk. And so they were still at risk. One was saying, man, I don't know anything about this. Or previously I had something on my record and I got in some trouble. And so what we have to do for our black males who are doing well academically is not forget that they have problems as well.

(20:51):

And because they've got it together now academically, they're going to follow up and follow through because they're doing that. So I get a lot of feedback from putting black males into leadership responsibilities. I've got one now that I'm looking specifically to create something for him in student government because I know if he's involved with something that'll make a difference with him in his life. And then it may sound odd, but the reason I did the black faculty and staff lunch was someone said to me one time, do you know that you're the senior level black administrator at the college. And I didn't really think about that when I got hired. I just thought I was on the leadership team. But when I looked around, I was like, I guess I am in the role that if it doesn't start with me, it may not ever get started. And so putting that together, and the funniest thing happened, so we did this, get to know you, bingo with the faculty and staff, and one of the questions was, I do not like chocolate.

(22:13):

So it just turns out that the next day I had a meeting with somebody who I remembered on that card said, I do not like chocolate, but I had chocolates in the middle of the table, so I moved all the chocolates down. That's the same person that I have emailed for a couple years but have never had a chance to have in a meeting. And so to have that, and then she just so happened, she says, you'll never believe this. My son is the DEI coordinator at one of the state universities. And right after this I went and called him and told him what you did and how good it made us feel, and he should do something like that at his university. And so she sent me his contact information. And so my goal is to reach out to him and just say hello, because he's younger, probably in his early thirties or something.

(23:21):

So it's those types of things that happen, just leveraging everything. And I think changing the mindset that, I mean really saying to leverage in a positive way, you have to leverage relationships in a very positive way. And I think teaching students how to do that, teaching faculty and staff how to do that and be okay with it is just another thing you have to do in leadership because we don't have all the answers, but where we fall short I think, is that we don't take a step. And so getting students to take a step, getting faculty and staff to take a step, there were some people who were very scared about coming to that meeting the other day and they gave me their feedback. And it wasn't that they were scared that they'd lose their job, but they were scared that it might look divisive. And I said, yeah, and it probably could and I understand that. But we also actually had the NAACP there. And one of the goals for me is to continue to do

this and bring in community. We had a black caterer and to bring in people from the community that can share their businesses and talk about their businesses, just kind of, it's a whole network.

Researcher (24:51):

Now, and this isn't really one of my questions, but did you speak with Dr. Bass about this before you did it?

Dr. Melody (25:00):

I did it, but he's kind of given me the green light with mentor kinds of things. And so I'm going to explain to him how my approach was because I am leveraging that meeting for mentors as well. You can see really quickly who can help you because I feel like if I need something and I know you and have a friend, then that friend could help me and you would make that happen. And so I feel like that's what needs to happen on campus when I need some help from staff. I've got to know who to go to. And the only reason is, I think it is hard to kind of explain that to people without people thinking that you're just trying to get over on somebody. But it is more than that. I mean, it's how the world operates. It is your circle beyond your circle. And for the people who were a little afraid, I just say, Hey, we're looking for mentors. We are looking for mentors. Come on out if you're a little nervous and we'll talk to you about mentoring. And I did make the announcement that we're looking for mentors.

Researcher (26:27):

It's a great way to approach it and a great follow through because like even the circle beyond your circle example of the person you met with who you didn't know her son as a young professional, there's a mentor and a speaker, and I mean, there's all sort of things to come out of that and a win-win for him, I'm sure. My next question is about policy, because a lot of times for these kinds of success outcomes, we can talk about culture in the sense, but that can mean a lot of different things. But what's a staple here? What's something that you believe over the last five years or even before, policy around withdrawals or policy around grade forgiveness? Is there a policy or set something that comes to mind that you believe has had the most impact on creating successful outcomes when it comes to equitable outcomes for Black students?

Dr. Melody (27:31):

That's a great question. And I'm going to start out by saying policy-wise, no. However, that's probably why. It's almost like there's this feeling that if you have too many policies, then it works opposite of how you need it to work. And so what I've noticed is there's just enough policies that if you need to work with a student or work with a situation, you're not going to be penalized. And so what's more important is to have definitely all the accreditation standard pieces, all that done, and then all the auditing and all the financial aid pieces done. But beyond that, it's kind of a set of procedures. What's the procedure for this and can we tweak that procedure? And what I've seen is, and it might be the same at your institution, but the suspension, all the students that are on these lists, they always get a green light to come back. And it's probably similar, but at my other institution, that wasn't the case. There was a clear demarcation of when you're coming back and when you're not coming back, but here you can come back. And so since you can come back to the college, even though you've not done well academically, that helps students of color. Now,

our county school district is such that you have just as many white students as black students who are getting suspended.

(29:27):

But I think the staple in this community is probably the fact that Dr. Bass, to me, has good relationships with black, white, rich, poor and is seen as a bridge builder, a collaborator open to new things. And I think that has helped from the top down that he has that persona in the community and he hasn't been afraid to try different things. I wouldn't say he was radical, but I would say that he was very open to thinking through ideas and making sure that since I've been here, that he's been open to allowing people to do it.

Researcher (30:30):

Key stakeholder groups, you mentioned the community. Who are the key stakeholder groups to your college that impact the way you lead equity and diversity initiatives?

Dr. Melody (30:45):

So you've got to start, I think with the president's council, okay, you've got to start here because you have money (financial resources), you have academic resources, you have continuing ed, you have all the components of what you want to be able to do for minority students here. So that's the first one. The next one for me is my student services staff, because they really have to provide phenomenal customer service in my opinion, because a student has to feel welcome. They have to feel like there's someone to go to if they need some help. Then the one that we're working on is faculty members because you have part-time, and so they're key stakeholders, but they're not here very often, but they're teaching a lot of the classes that your students are in. And so developing the relationships there in the community, I'm a board member with the Boys and Girls Club, so they have been very supportive of some of the things that I've done, the Crosby Scholars program, so they're key in referrals and recruitment and using the space on campus.

(32:22):

The board of trustees for me as well. I mean, the other night I didn't present to the board of trustees, and it was at the end of the meeting and one of the board of trustees said, student services, where are you? And it made me realize that they want to hear about students at every board of trustees meeting, if I'm there. And that's not the mode of how we operate a board of trustees meeting. Generally, they're not very long here, but we had a new CIO and we've got a new small business center person. And so both of them gave presentations, so the leadership team members did not all present. And so just to hear that was good because they're the ones who are in the community talking about DJCC all the time. So having a good relationship with them is great. And then I guess for me, since I'm always trying to find money and housing places like the shelters, any of your scholarship donors, any of our community food partnerships, and then those would be the ones that would jump out to me in terms of key stakeholders that help with the students here.

Researcher (34:08):

Yeah, very good. The last question I have for you is sort of one that I'm going to get, and I'll probably be charged with answering, and I do my cross case analysis, but I'm going to get your feedback on it. So if there was another community college that isn't seeing quantitatively or

feeling culturally that they are narrowing the gap between white and black student success or feelings of belonging, what advice would you give someone in your role at another community college? They say, man, I want to sort of move toward where you all are.

Dr. Melody (34:59):

Well, I believe it has to start with the president. The president has to be 100% behind the initiatives. I think a position that, even if it's not, because I don't know if you read what happened at the University of Florida over the weekend, they can no longer have DEI in any of the titles of their positions. There has to be some advocate on campus that is consistently putting the message out whether people like it or not. It helps so much in my position for them to see a black male. It does. It does. And everybody knows I could fumble over a presentation. I could give out the wrong telephone number, I could trip going up the stage. But everybody knows at the end of the day that I'm about getting these students in, having a good experience and on the back end, moving on to their next destination.

(36:10):

And so I think you have to have a president, someone advocating, and it is good to have people who look like the affinity group that you're trying to have an impact on. And then within that, you've kind of got to let that person find his flow. Because I did come into this position myself thinking, oh, everything I did at the urban college, everything I did at my last place I could do here. And it takes a year or so to realize that in theory, it could probably work, but it would take a long time to do that. So you just have to modify it based on your environment and go from there. And I think those three things would be really helpful.

Researcher (37:15):

Awesome. Well, you've answered all the questions I have for us today, and I do have the three years worth of DEI document updates. Is there any other place you would point me to on your website or anything that you think would be helpful in helping me better understand how your black students are being successful here?

Dr. Melody (37:41):

Well, let me just mention just a few things. One Man to Man, I'll just say man to man, because you probably had a minority male mentoring program. We did not get funding for that from the state. And so really the president said what they did not give you, I will find institutional funds to help you do what you want to do. So institutional funding is big. Summer Bridge- and we're moving to the name, I think Summer Advantage is to have something during the summer for students who are coming in is important. I think what really helped us to, we have that student support button on our website, and it's a support button that you click on, you answer a few questions and within a couple of hours someone gets back with you. And that's how we identify emergency needs. And that's helped a whole lot of staff.

(38:47):

And then I've mentioned earlier, no, I didn't mention this, but having a unrestricted pot of money that I could use for emergency purposes has really helped me with students being able to, I mean, we've had HEERF funds, we've had the different funding pots, but the foundation has what's called the DJCC funds, and they're just unrestricted dollars. And so being able to send the

students somewhere to get something that they need, it really helps all the time. And that unrestricted funds. And so I did want to mention that it's having access to that now. Now I've got to go back and tell the foundation they got to put some more money in.

(39:47):

Right. You're actually using it. Awesome. Absolutely. Thank you so much again for your time.

(39:47):

You got it. You got it.

President Versatile- Love Mercy Community College

Researcher (00:00):

Alright. Thank you President Versatile for sitting with me and answering my questions about the success your college has experienced. Can you describe the equity and diversity initiatives here at Love Mercy Community College (LMCC)?

President Versatile (00:16):

Sure. Well, I think we have been very focused on equity as a central priority for a while now. It's been one of our core values that we list along with our mission and vision. So it's something that we have talked about both in our strategic planning efforts and in our accreditation efforts. And then of course, more practically we have built programming around those efforts. So I think clearly we have made equity an institutional priority, but of course it's looked a little different over time. And now we're at the point and have been for a couple of years where we have a group called Equity Champions that meets and a steering committee also that runs that group. We have very deliberate efforts on campus to learn about equity and belonging and to then evaluate ourselves across a variety of areas and then to find ways to actually implement a lot of what we're talking about. So I do feel like it's a deliberate effort on our part to be as inclusive as possible, to bring as many people to campus as possible, and then to help them find their place and to have an equitable experience.

(02:00):

And I think you'll find that that's supported from the very top, and I mean me, as the president, but also it's an effort of other leadership and then faculty and staff. I do feel like it's something that permeates the campus environment. That being said, of course we are not where we want to be and probably it's, as we all know, it's an ongoing effort. Chances are, you're never in that ideal spot because you're always working toward that ideal spot where you've created the perfect inclusive environment. An environment where everybody has the resources and the support they need. I don't know if that answered your question.

Researcher (02:49):

Absolutely, it did. I get excited as I listen because I see the parallels even in the theories and things that I've been studying around this. So yes, you did. Can you talk a little bit about how long you've been here at the college, different roles you've held?

President Versatile (03:11):

So I have been here at the college since 2008 and only in the presidency since fall. And I was in the interim president role for a while. But prior to that, I had been running our college foundation. So I handled a variety of things from marketing to community relations to a lot of our overall messaging. So even though I have been here for a while, this role is new for me.

Researcher (03:47):

Yes. When you think about how as a leader you use your influence to push forward the equity practices you described, how would you say your personal values, beliefs, even experiences, sort of bring context around that?

President Versatile (04:16):

I think one of the reasons I've always been happy here at the college since 2008 is I have loved the idea that I'm not just working in education, but I'm working in a community-based setting. My job was always about more than just one thing. It was about scholarships for students and it was across a wide spectrum of our community and from various high schools. And for me it was even more special because I grew up in this area. So what we were doing was serving the community. It wasn't just about everybody going off to college somewhere and you just work in higher education. You're looking for ways to make your community stronger through your higher education institution. And for us here at LMCC, we're the only higher education institution here. We're not competing with other community colleges or four year schools. So we are kind of it when it comes to offering post-secondary education to people who are here and who are not necessarily going to go away to school.

(05:25):

So for me, the community college has been about the strength of our two counties from an economic development perspective, workforce helping people have good paying jobs and successful lives. And so I wouldn't be where I am, I don't think if I didn't believe that we were here to make things better and to make things better for the people who are here. And the people who are here are incredible, and I think it's our job to be as welcoming as we can to every single person who may want to come to college or access any of our services. And I heard a speaker recently say to a group of presidents that it's our job to make, or the best thing that we could ever do as presidents is to help everyone from faculty and staff to our students feel like they really belong, that they have found their home.

(06:40):

And I believe that. And so I believe that I've taken that to my new role as president as well. And I mean, this may sound a little, not real concrete, but I think as I've talked to people these last couple of months, I've been trying to open my office. I've invited people in for what I call coffee chats. And faculty and staff have been coming by. And even though it's not that I'm getting to know people for the first time, I'm getting to know them in my new role. And I think I have talked a lot about just making people feel like they belong. You want everyone to feel like they've found their home. Of course, they don't all have the same needs. Making a faculty member feel like they've found their home is different from making a minority, underprivileged student from one of our high schools feel like he's found his home. I mean, everybody needs something different to make them feel at home.

Researcher (07:50):

You jumped right into my next question with that one. I'm going to ask it specifically, but you kind of answered, I want to see if you have anything else that could lend itself to me, but in what ways do you gather feedback from particularly from Black students, Black faculty, Black staff, about their experiences?

President Versatile (08:08):

I think, again, I mentioned the coffee chats I've been doing, which I mean that's nothing unique. People come into new leadership roles all the time and they have little ways of talking to people. But I think people have actually liked that I invited them into my office, I make them coffee myself, pick up donuts and I didn't have an agenda. A lot of times they would come in with a notepad like, okay, what are we going to talk about? What do you need from me? What are you going to tell me to do? And it really was a time just to chat. I know you don't solve everything in an hour coffee chat, but I mean, I think those are the ways that you hear from people and you hear what's on their minds and you might not hear everything in one hour, but sometimes you hear what's bothering them or something that they're excited about or something they hope I will do. And that's the kind of thing I'm trying to do.

Researcher (09:06):

I love the informal, they come in thinking there's an agenda and it's like, oh, shoulders go down kind of thing. But are there any formal or structured things that when we look at the numbers, this narrowed equity gap. It's phenomenal for the size institution here, from what I've seen, any structured policies or procedures that you believe have impacted and created this type of success?

President Versatile (09:39):

Well, we've worked really hard at these things, and I think we're still fairly critical of ourselves in terms of what needs to be done. I mean, we're always looking at policies, for example, and what needs to change for a variety of reasons, but for equity reasons. I mean, what needs to change to help our students be more successful? Why is this policy over here problematic? Why is this physical design of this building problematic? Did that handicap door not work? It was supposed to? What are the barriers that might be in place? And so I think that we are always focused on some effort that's trying to get us to where we want to go. And I think, again, we don't think we're where we need to be yet, but I guess it doesn't change the fact that we have put a lot of things in place that are meant to address those inequities and those gaps.

(10:55):

And I hope that's what we're seeing is that things are working. And even just marketing, for example, we have a tremendous marketing team, and sometimes we say to ourselves, well, we don't exactly know why things are working so well, but we are somehow reaching students. And whether that's just being so strategic about representation in our marketing and helping all students know that they could be successful here and that there's a place for them. Whether it's an adult learner, whether it's a minority student, whether it's an older student, how are we putting that into our billboards? How do we structure what we do in our enrollment center so that they're having a tailored approach and getting access to academic support services that they might need or our TRIO program or things that may help them be more successful.

Researcher (12:00):

What kinds of resistance is there and where do you find it? You may not even name it resistance, but maybe pushback, challenges, places to find more ways to bring others into where you are, what kinds of resistance do you see?

President Versatile (12:23):

I think that most people here [long pause]

(12:29):

Want to be inclusive. They want students to be successful, they want the best for the people coming onto this campus, but sometimes we don't all call our efforts the same thing. And so when you approach someone and tell them they need to do a better job of X, Y, or Z, sometimes people think to themselves, look, I believe these things. I'm doing my best. And in many cases they probably are, that they are doing what is successful with the students they work with. But it may not be the same approach or strategy that our equity team came up with or that I'm talking about. And so I think a lot of it is, I mean, it's probably more conversation and understanding of where people are or what they're objecting to. If they seem to be pushing back on where they think they are being successful and maybe we're not seeing it.

Researcher (13:31):

Yeah, we don't always call our efforts the same thing. What advice would you give another community college president or executive leader as they're working toward closing their equity gaps?

President Versatile (13:51):

I think that we have for a long time now been focused on data, probably since we were first involved in national programs like Achieving The Dream here at the college, and then we also transitioned into being part of the Completion By Design initiative. We've been very focused on data. And data as we know, tells a story and sometimes is more convincing than someone standing in front of a room and saying, you should do this. And I think we have used that to our advantage a lot over the years. And people here are accustomed to us bringing out the data to show, I mean, faculty, for example, to show different success rates in different courses or where there are gaps. We get the oh, really, maybe I do need to tweak something when I see this, or this, or this. And in some cases, the data shows great success, and so we can say, oh, here's something we're doing really well. So I think data would be a good starting point for any college that might be beginning to engage in these efforts. And then I think maybe... I'll just leave it at that.

Researcher (15:10):

Alright. [pause]

(15:11):

Each community college is unique. It's the beauty of it, of our system and of the community colleges across the nation. What characteristics of this community college, whether you look at size, location, I don't know if you would identify as rural or urban characteristic because of

where you are, political landscape, even, what characteristics shape the way you lead here for equitable student success?

President Versatile (15:52):

I think our geographic location, so being in smaller towns surrounded by larger cities. The fact that, like I've already mentioned, that we're the only higher education institution here. I think that we are a leader in the counties that we serve. And this sounds a little dramatic, but sort of a beacon for opportunity and for people to move forward. And so I think that I have to recognize as a leader that we have a diverse community. We have an older community, we have a conservative community, but we also have been given incredible opportunities to help move this community forward. And I think we are well-respected by our communities. And so even if politics are different or even if life experiences are different, I think I'm really grateful that we are well-liked and well-respected. That gives us the opportunity to push forward in ways that might not otherwise be possible.

Researcher (17:23):

Yes. Thank you. And if you could name a few key stakeholders that you believe really have been key, that you believe may be pushing forward equity initiatives alongside you.

President Versatile (17:43):

So I think on every campus, you're always going to have a handful of people who are willing to take a leadership role and step into the spotlight with equity efforts or with any effort. So I think you're always going to want to identify those people who are willing to be leaders. But then I think, again, we created a broader group called Equity Champions, and that's sometimes up to 50 people in a meeting. It kind of varies a little bit, but that's a bigger group that is not just five or six people in a meeting room. That's a bigger group of people who are really touching all aspects of campus and are helping us not only understand perspectives, but also as we move forward with initiatives. It's a great group to help us infuse things across campus. So groups like that. And then we have a Center for Teaching and learning, for example, and I think that has been a great place for us to share resources. So that's been important in a lot of ways as well.

Researcher (19:17):

If I were to get some additional support for the things that we've talked about, I have to do a document analysis as well, where would you point me to? You mentioned very early on the strategic plan. You mentioned that. Is there anywhere else, annual reports that I might find online or a president's message from you?

President Versatile (19:37):

I mean, I can certainly give you our most recent annual report. It is both online or I can give you a hard copy. You will see our mission, vision and values there, but then I don't know, I mean, perhaps what you see may be covered more generally. I mean, hopefully that speaks to our values as well. I don't know if you're going to find direct information in it, but hopefully it's a testament to what we're trying to do.

Researcher (20:28):

Okay.

(20:29):

I'll ask the same question of other leaders.

President Versatile (20:32):

They may have some other ideas. I mean, I don't want to just junk you up with mess.

Researcher (20:37):

Well, in some of the other conversations I've had, we were talking about the recent sort of, I don't know, we don't want to call them warnings, but recent information that we've all gotten about using certain words. Are you doing these things? As you move along the mission, vision, and values of your institution, I wanted to give you opportunity and space to speak to how you plan to lead through that.

President Versatile (21:30):

Well, I think across a whole variety of topics, we are compelled to follow the law as even new things come up that may shift how we have done things in the past or that may change things for the future. But I think as we've discovered, I think I try not to overreact. When you see the first version of something that's out there and you know that sometimes there are tweaks, whether it's legislation or whatever, sometimes things get tweaked over time and may make more sense a little further down the road. But also that sometimes it doesn't necessarily force a change to what you're doing, even though at face value you think it's going to, it doesn't.

(22:39):

Laws around equity don't keep us from being an inclusive and equitable campus. We may have to think more deeply sometimes about how we frame things, and we may need to be more thoughtful about some of how we explain things. But deep down, I don't know that it's always going to have an adverse impact on what we do, especially when we have a campus like this where, you know what? I think most people really do want to do the right thing for our students, and it just sometimes takes us a little while to figure out how we're going to be able to get there.

Researcher (23:26):

Well said. Thank you so much.

President Versatile (23:28):

Yeah.

Vice President Jewel- Love Mercy Community College

Researcher (00:00):

Thank you VP Jewel for talking with me today. Can you describe, or how would you describe the equity and inclusion initiatives here at this college?

Vice President Jewel (00:11):

So I lead that, I'm the Chief Diversity Officer in addition to being the vice president of student affairs. So I co-lead our equity steering committee. We've been intentionally and strategically doing our work for the past six years, maybe. And we identified students of color as our focus of the work that we were doing when we started. So we didn't generalize our work. So the things that we did, we made sure we looked at it through the lens of a student of color and we have continued that work. Of course, always assessing the way that we do the work and identifying other areas to focus on.

Researcher (00:54):

And you said six years, is that as Chief Diversity Officer?

Vice President Jewel (01:00):

No, I meant since we have been identified as The Equity Steering Committee. It's been six years now.

Researcher (01:06):

How long have you been here at LMCC?

Vice President Jewel (01:09):

Seven.

Researcher (01:20):

That's good. So how do you either in your particular role as vice president or your role as diversity and equity officer, how do you gather feedback from Black students, Black faculty, Black staff?

Vice President Jewel (01:39):

We don't have Black faculty.

(01:43):

We have very few Black faculty. From a full-time perspective, I think we have two total across campus. We have 17 Black men that work at the campus regardless of the role. May it be part-time, full-time, leadership, non- maintenance, it includes maintenance. We do focus groups. We have the Minority Male Success Initiative on our campus. And so we've done focus groups with our men of color, specifically men of color. But I think a lot of the feedback has just been general through the CCSSE instrument and other assessments that we've done. None of our assessments are race-based. While our numbers look great, to be honest, we don't talk about race. We don't do a lot of stuff related to race. Even when we identified students of color as our primary group, I think we still focus on all students and not necessarily students of color.

(02:48):

So we look at our data, we disaggregate our data, we understand how our students of color are doing, and even though overall they may be persisting and completing in certain areas, it takes them a little bit longer to get to that place compared to our other students. And so our institution focuses heavily on all. So I think there have been things that we've implemented, and I can say

maybe from 2021 to 2022, the biggest thing that we implemented is eight week courses. And the research shows that the implementation of eight week courses on your campus has a greater impact on student success for marginalized populations. So that probably is why that success metric went back up. We also did some things around withdrawals and reaching out to students and thinking about what was going on during those periods. The other thing is our enrollment is low. When you think about some of our students of color, although they may be persisting and completing at higher rates, the overall enrollment of that group is low. So if you think about the men of color from year to year, it shifts and changes on the dashboards, but our numbers are so low for new men of color that it doesn't even show up on the dashboard. So I think we have areas that we can work on in those spaces.

Researcher (04:18):

I'm interested in what you said about the all piece, and the question was around feedback from particularly Black students, Black faculty to Black staff, and then you started talking about things that you believe institution-wise that have changed that do impact students of color and underserved populations in your role. Well, you've got dual roles. What beliefs or values, experiences even do you bring to the role that you believe may be advancing these more equitable practices?

Vice President Jewel (05:05):

I think I push back. I think I use my voice in ways that a lot of people wouldn't use their voice, out of fear of potential loss of job, or I use my voice and the person that was the VP before me, she used her voice. It was a black woman. So if you think about the leadership of the work from the timeframe that you're talking about, Black people were leading those initiatives. I do challenge data, number data from the perspective of while we may be having Black students specifically that are persisting and completing, what are their experiences? I personally, and this is just my personal perspective, and I've said it on campus, but I do think we're trying to do some things to address it. Just because I completed, doesn't mean I had a good experience, doesn't mean that I didn't deal with some things or go through some things on our campus. And so I think that's where sometimes when we get caught up in, oh, well you have Black students persisting and completing, well, we don't have them coming.

(06:25):

So that means that somebody's going out saying something to where, yeah, I graduated from LMCC, but I don't recommend you go to LMCC. Not necessarily saying that's the case. The other thing, when I think about the surveying and the things that we do, and most institutions do this, we don't ask, do you feel a sense of belonging? So if you asked me, do you feel a sense of belonging at LMCC, I might give you, on a scale of one to five, I might give you a three or four. But if you ask me if I feel a sense of belonging as a student of color or a person of color, or a person from the LGBTQ plus community, or a person with a disability, I can guarantee you'll get a different response. But we don't ask those kinds of questions. So that's what I mean when I say even though we look at our data and our data tells us the story that it tells us about our students of color, I still think that when it comes down to where the rubber meets the road of what we do, and how we communicate it out, it becomes "all" and a generalized kind of thing.

(07:27):

We're in a space where our faculty right now don't want us talking about race.

Researcher (07:32):

Your State?

Vice President Jewel (07:33):

No. But before that, they didn't want us to talk about race. And so I think the other thing is understanding the historical context of where we sit as a community is a piece that people miss in their efforts.

Researcher (07:46):

Yeah. I'm going to skip the next question, you took me down further. So let's talk about that. So each community college is unique, uniquely situated in a community. What characteristics of this community, size, location, political landscape, being urban characteristic near bigger cities, what do you think really shapes the way you strategically lead when you look at all of that?

Vice President Jewel (08:15):

I think from a DEI perspective, if you think about, and this is me answering but also I think adding, I think one of the things we make a mistake on in the work that we do across our campuses and related to DEIB is it's so heavily focused on students and not the people that work at the institution. And so if you expect me to create an environment that's equitable, diverse, inclusive, and creates a sense of belonging for the student, if I as a faculty or staff person don't feel that, then how can I create that for somebody else? And so in thinking about the context from starting with recruitment and retention of faculty and staff, the people that are going to have to implement the things that we want to happen for our students, we recruit in the same places. We are surrounded by college towns and many colleges, but we don't actively recruit at HBCUs.

(09:19):

I don't know that we think about the historical context of the community because many people, at LMCC, don't get me wrong in anything that I'm saying, LMCC is a great place to work. It has its areas of improvements, and the county itself isn't that bad. But this county has been in a major national newspaper twice in the last few years based on race relations. It is very much a Trump type of political atmosphere. There are parts of the county where people of color are told you don't go into these parts of the county when it gets dark. So those are things you're combating and people know those things. So in thinking about how you shift and change the image of the institution, I personally feel that starts with faculty and staff. You have to shift who you have in your space to get people to want to come into your space.

(10:25):

And if your primary focus is the student and not the people that have to serve the student, then you may not always reap the benefit that you want. So I think in higher education, we don't view it as a business and it is a business. The students are our customer. And if you look at any thriving Fortune 500 company and why they are thriving, while they do spend time ensuring that they are meeting customer needs, they put a lot of emphasis into what they do with their employees. May it be in development of the employees, being proactive in the hiring, of how can I implement a professional learning plan so you can be successful or just creating an environment that they feel like they're care about. So I think you have to be able to demonstrate that in a way that pushes beyond the community. So if you talk to some people about why they

chose LMCC, may it be a student or an employee, they knew all of the historical context, but they said, well, I'm going to go and see what happens. May not necessarily have been my first choice, but that might've been my only choice. And the thing that we combat at LMCC is that there are three other community colleges within a 30 minute radius of us that if I don't have a good experience here, can go somewhere.

Researcher (12:09):

And then with online options, I mean it is not even a drive really.

Vice President Jewel (12:14):

And so I think those are things that we try to think about when we're thinking about the things that we do. But I think the thing that we don't do is we're not explicit. And if we're going to survey people or if we're going to get feedback from people, it's always general, and to me, the general question gets you the answer that you want and not the answer that you need.

Researcher (12:38):

Yes. You talked about how you are using your voice and sort of giving that pushback, that stretch. What type of resistance and why do you think the resistance is there when you try to operationalize some of the things you're talking about?

Vice President Jewel (13:06):

I think any resistance you get to anything is because it is taking people outside of the status quo of how they function and operate. I think when you get resistance, people like to think, oh, you just don't agree with me. No, because that change could be impacting the way that I do my job. That change could be impacting my job altogether. So I think the resistance we get is shifting the status quo. Why are we doing what we are doing? What we are doing right now works. I think when you think about the DEIB part, people confuse equity and equality and nobody wants to do anything extra for anybody. They don't want to have to combat, well, you did X for such and such. And so we have this explaining culture that we feel like we have to explain why we do the things that we do to people.

(14:02):

So I think for me, dealing with resistance regardless of a topic is spending time about why you're doing what you're doing. Your why should drive your how. I think a lot of times people let their how drive their why? And so it puts you in a position to have resistance. You can't really articulate why you're doing what you're doing. I think from a race perspective here, it's the fairness, that if you do something or even not just race, LGBTQ plus, or whatever the case may be, even if it's not just race, it's the well, if I do it for them, what am I saying about the other people? And what I find unfortunate is that we would prefer to appease the majority, than address the minority group and then what is the messaging that you're communicating to that population? So I think that resistance comes from a place of people truly wanting to be fair.

(15:12):

Do we have pockets of people who just have issues and probably need to leave? Yeah. I think we all have that, but I think it's more that people are worried about being fair and they have this thing of having to explain. It's that old mindset of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. And I

did this. People are in, we are in an explaining and comparison culture where, I mean in higher education in general, where we don't do things because you need an explanation to the why. Or you compare to previous times or you compare to your experiences. And so therefore, I didn't get all that assistance, why do I need to give you that assistance? Or you have three days that you can do anything in my class. Why do I need to accommodate you if you've got a disability beyond that? I gave you three days. You could do anything with the three days. So why are you giving me an accommodation plan for a student to be out? So it's a lot of that I think.

Researcher (16:24):

So what advice would you give a community college leader who says, well, we're not even seeing the numbers. I mean, we are not even seeing the data look like this. So whether, I don't know how, or what to bring to show that what you're doing is working, but what we are doing is not, where should they start?

Vice President Jewel (16:49):

But I would challenge that LMCC doesn't know why we have the numbers we have because we are involved in so much. We are involved in every initiative that you can think of under the sun. We implement 1000 things. So you can't say, I would challenge anybody that can pinpoint why our numbers look like they look. I would challenge if somebody told you this is why our numbers look like that. I would challenge that because we have several high impact practices here. We have some great programs here. We have some amazing things for students that are available to students. All of those things combined, I think, have to do with that. But I think things, I would be curious, even with those numbers disaggregating that more like who are those Black students? What were they engaged in across campus? Were they engaged in our TRIO program or were those programs led by people of color or what was their engagement with other people of color on campus? Then further, what were your experiences? You completed, but what were your experiences? I think the challenge that institutions have leading any change effort, whatever it looks like, is that they don't think about where they are institutionally when it comes to organizational change and the stages of organizational change and how their campus collectively processes through organizational change. The other thing is I will challenge anybody. How does your campus normally deal with a conflict?

(18:30):

Accountability? and uncomfortable conversations? If on a regular basis you don't hold, for the most part, hold people accountable, you don't really deal with a bunch of conflict, and you skate around uncomfortable conversations. If that's how you lead in general, I don't care what you put on top of it, it's not going to ever flourish the way that you want it to flourish. That's good because when you're thinking about implementing change and implementing things, you have to hold people accountable. You have to have uncomfortable conversations. You have to deal with conflict. And so if you can't just do that on a basic level, I think it'd be hard for you to implement. And then if you think about things like race relations and the political climate related to DEIB, things that are controversial, political, uncomfortable, and you layer that on top of the fact that organizationally you don't know where you are or you're in stage one of organizational change, which is status quo, and your leadership for the most part, don't hold people accountable. They don't deal with conflict. They don't have uncomfortable conversations. You can't layer something as politically charged and controversial as something as race relations or DEIB on top

of that, it's not going to work. It's not going to move forward. You're not going to move the needle the way you potentially could if you did those things because you have to hold people accountable.

Researcher (20:12):

Are you the senior most person of color here?

Vice President Jewel (20:15):

I'm the only one.

Researcher (20:18):

Do people come to you when they are ready to have uncomfortable conversations?

Vice President Jewel (20:28):

I'm the glorified mediator because I don't have issues with conflict. Not that I like conflict. I can't get anything done if we don't deal with issues. I do think I do a good job of mediating conversations to a resolution, not just a vent session to where we don't accomplish anything but mediate to a resolution. I am, what's the word I want to use that has been used before and I used it to, I can maneuver a difficult conversation and still be respectful, be professional in all the things. So I think in student affairs for sure. I mediate a lot of conversations. I have other people who have said, Hey, I need you to mediate something. Not saying that I have or I will, but, and I've said this in public, our issue is from a leadership perspective, and I don't necessarily just mean senior leadership. In general, we don't like to make people uncomfortable and we don't like to deal with conflict.

Researcher (21:55):

I understand. We're talking a lot about the internal college. Who are your key stakeholders that you believe have helped advance the equity work that may be a partner outside of the college?

Vice President Jewel (22:17):

Outside of the partners that we have just in our general work that we do, I don't think it's equity-related. I just think that as a college we have really good partnerships with community partners, with business and industry. I can't say that they come to us with the lens of hiring a more diverse staff. They just want to hire more people. I don't think diverse staff even comes up in a lot of the conversations, locally. But we do have really, really good relationships with K through 12. Our business partners, our community partners, we are very involved. Many of us sit on boards in the community. We try to engage and participate in as many of the fundraisers that they do for stuff within the community. So I think from that perspective, we do really well. I just can't say it comes from a lens of equity or to push equity initiatives just based on geographical location.

Researcher (23:20):

So many of the things, this is good. Many of the things that you've talked about, I already see alignment with the literature that I've pulled and all that. So this is very, very helpful. I also am charged to do a document analysis to sort of support the things that I learned from the interviews.

Where would you point me to maybe see examples or some of this highlighted? Is it your strategic plan? I have a copy of your annual report. Is it the website in general? Is there any place you would point me?

Vice President Jewel (23:55):

I mean, you can look at the strategic plan. I think we did a good job of integrating equity into that. It's generalized. It doesn't call out race. That was a battle that I lost. But we say all, we still stick to those kinds of things. We do have an equity page on our website. Legacy is our men of color program. So there's a page that gives you more information about that. We have a very robust international education program, where we, I know TRIO sponsored somebody to do international and it's been students of color in the past. They've also done white people, but I think they've had a couple of students of color in the past that they've sponsored to be able to do international things.

Researcher (25:00):

Thank you. What next for this college? So we asked the question about advice for another community college. What advice do you have for your own community college or what's next?

Vice President Jewel (25:20):

What's next for us is the thing that I just was talking about when it comes to leadership. We're not going to be able to move our DEI efforts forward if we don't get leadership to be able to have crucial conversations and honest, transparent, reflective conversations about how you potentially, even in your niceness and even in your agreeance, perpetuate some of the issues and challenges that we have. Because while our numbers look good, our students are not having, or faculty and staff of color are not having good experiences. That's not sufficient for me.

Researcher (26:03):

Thank you so much.

(26:05):

You are welcome.

Dr. Benevolence- Love Mercy Community College

Dr. Benevolence (00:01):

I am happy that we seem to be doing well and have borne out through the data. And I did a presentation on that data. I may not remember any of my answers, but.

Researcher (00:09):

Well, I really want to just start off by asking, in your role and the way you lead, how do you describe your community college's efforts, your equity and inclusion, diversity, belonging efforts here? How would you describe it?

Dr. Benevolence (00:30):

I think that there are a core group of people who are super devoted, super excited, super passionate about the work. I think that permeates most of the leadership. I think there are also people in that core group that are boots on the ground folks, but I still think it's a smaller group than it needs to be. So it's really the height, this is pre Covid as well, but at the height of our Equity Champions work, we had 75 people who were coming. Majority of those people were either in a leadership position or in a staff position. We did have some faculty who were engaged, and we still have some faculty who are engaged. But that's a population that I think is true of any type of change effort on campus. The faculty tend to be the, and I think there's, from their perception, when you talk about things like making changes to impact equity or making changes to impact student success, there's just this automatic assumption that somehow that we're saying you're not doing what you're supposed to be doing. And so you have to kind of backup and work through it and address it more through best practices and professional learning opportunities. And it's not always quite as direct of conversations as we can have within more of the staff and the leadership realm.

Researcher (02:02):

And so yes, because in your role, I'm glad you answered that way because you've got the student services piece, but you've also got the academic piece. And so understanding those perspectives and the lens from which people see this and their roles is really important. When you think about the way you lead in this role across faculty and staff, how are your personal experiences and beliefs as even a female leader, and how do you think that contributes to advancing equity work?

Dr. Benevolence (02:39):

Yeah, I mean, I think for me it's harder to do equity work than it has been to do some of the student success work. I just think it is harder as a white female to have those conversations. We've been working on this project with Achieving The Dream, and I kind of keep saying, I know I need to be the one to be saying some of the really and difficult things, but I don't always feel comfortable or feel like I have the capacity or the knowledge to really talk about that because I have experienced, I've experienced it a little bit as a female, but I'm in education, so not really. I don't work in a field where I have struggled or I have felt like I was being discriminated against or I was being treated differently because of one of my characteristics. So I think being aware of and acknowledging that I have shortcomings when it comes to leading and having conversations and pushing back. I think I can say this is important work. And I think I can show data and say, again, not pointing fingers. You guys, we have great faculty, we have great staff, but somewhere we're missing the mark.

(03:58):

That's a rare example of closing the gap. Usually what you see is our efforts cause all to rise, but you don't close the gap. We've had developmental education as another place where we look like that. I mean, we've pretty much closed all the gaps, but I think in my role, finding resources and providing support has been really important. I mean, our equity work really launched as a result of a $90,000 grant I got through some extra money that was left over from a national foundation grant completion by design, and that was when we had our first pot of money that was specifically devoted to advancing equity. So I think that's a place where I have been able to use my talents, I guess in a way that I feel confident. I mean, I do hope that I make it clear across

campus and the strategic plan falls underneath me. And so it was real important that we emphasized equity throughout the strategic plan. We changed our, again, this was all underneath my leadership, but we changed the mission statement to include equitable outcomes. We changed our values to include equity as one of our values now. It used to just be diversity. So I think those are some ways in which hopefully I have impacted the culture in terms of having these conversations that are often very difficult.

Researcher (05:47):

In what ways do you, especially you've got students under your purview, you've got faculty under your purview, you've got staff, so this is an interesting conversation with you. So Black students, faculty, Black students, Black faculty, black staff. If you wanted to know or gather feedback from them on a particular topic, how would you do it? Where would you go? How would you gather it?

Dr. Benevolence (06:13):

We have found that when we use surveys, especially with students, we don't find anything. Everybody rates us really high and we'll disaggregate by race.

Researcher (06:29):

Well, rating high is feedback.

Dr. Benevolence (06:31):

It is. It is. But we know we have issues. And so for us, we've tried focus groups and sometimes you get a little bit in a focus group. We did one, oh, it's been five or six years ago. It was when prior, well two presidents ago, we kind of specifically were looking for students who were of color and we had a large majority of them were our basketball players, but we had 20-25 students there. And even then it was really hard to get them, and maybe it's just talking in an open forum and we were asking direct, pointed questions like, tell us when you have felt that you didn't belong in a situation or whatever. But we were asking real specific questions. And again, for the most part, they told us positive things. Sometimes the people that show up are not going to be the ones who really have negative things to say.

(07:44):

Now, I think we now have a process by which somebody can go and fill out sort of an incident report and they can report something that might be concerning. And when those happen, VP Jewel or [named another Black staff member] are usually the ones who get those and those will come up through us. I don't know that I would say we've done a really good job of asking those questions. We do every year institutional climate survey, and there are questions on there about belonging and equity, but we just don't get a whole lot. And that's not, I would say that it's not because I think we're doing everything right. I think there are things that people are just either not comfortable writing down, they think they'll be identified. VP Jewel as a black female, I think people talk to her more and then she talks to me. So a lot of times that's a way I will get occasionally in an exit survey through HR as somebody is leaving the institution and going somewhere else, we will get hints of something that may be happening. And those are times when you just sort of address the individual circumstance. But I mean, I think that's probably something we could do a whole lot better than we do.

Researcher (09:23):

When you think about most impactful practices or policy changes, and you've been here a long time, what sticks out to you? When we did this, I knew it was the right thing for underrepresented students or Black students when we did this. Are there any ones that stick out?

Dr. Benevolence (09:45):

Yeah, I mean, I think we have been a leader in terms of Dev. Ed and we know that from our own data, the prior way of doing in the community college system, right? Yes. How long have you been in the system?

Researcher (10:01):

For 19 years.

Dr. Benevolence (10:12):

Oh, yes. I'm trying to remember how many iterations there have been. But back then we knew from our data that students swirled in Dev. Ed. and it was more likely that African-American students swirled than other groups of students. So we sort of stuck our neck out there. We went to this thing in Washington DC and basically we decided we were going to pick an area of the college and we were going to focus on it, and we were going to improve it and Dev Ed is what we picked. And so that's when we created what is now referred to as the College Transition Center. It was sort of the precursor of the last Dev Ed model, which now that's on its way out the door. I'm not sure that it worked everywhere, and maybe that's just about institutional culture, but when we established the College Transition Center and allowed some of Dev Ed to be more basic skills, so it wasn't costing students, you could break outside some of the rules of a pre-curricular class.

(11:33):

We were able to do some things I think really impacted students and led to much better outcomes. And we did that with all part-time staff. So the Transition Center at that time had no full-time staff, but we had hired the right people. So we hired some retired teachers who just had a passion for what they did and a passion for students. And we were really able, I mean, we eradicated completely any equity gaps in developmental education. And so that was one big thing. I think multiple measures for entrance into gateway math and English was another big thing. I think a lot of times students have skills and abilities and they would be just fine going right into college level English and math, but because of a GPA or bad testing, they're bad testers, they were getting stuck down there in Dev Ed. And if you were on the math committee, I mean those basic skills math can sometimes be harder than upper level math. And it's been so long since you've done them. I know every time I helped my children with middle school math and high school math, and I was really good at math.

Researcher (12:58):

When we talk about operationalizing some of these things, and I hear you really clearly, those are two good institutionalized pieces where you had the flexibility no matter within the state realm to do that. What resistance did you find as you think back about implementing those

things? And if not, just those things more broadly, if you want to answer in your role as an executive leader, how do you handle resistance?

Dr. Benevolence (13:31):

So with the Dev Ed piece, I mean, of course there was a concern with funding, and I think that's why back then, and I had worked at another community college and I remember they were so anti-change because we earned a ton of money on students in Dev Ed, but we had a president who did really focus on student success, and we were willing to take the hit. We were willing to make the right decisions for students, and you still gotta keep your doors open, but we also recognized if it works, then you're going to get those students in curriculum classes and you're still going to be earning the money. So I think that that was risk taking because you weren't certain it was going to work. So I think that was a key with the Dev Ed Redesign in that we were having to make a call based on student success and not on the college's bottom line.

(14:39):

And we were willing to do that. For multiple measures, we battled for a while with faculty over what that was going to look like, how we were going to provide either co-requisite support or what was going to be the plan if it failed. And we really had to have conversations with our faculty about, we need you to put forth your best efforts because if it fails, we wanted it to be because it wasn't the right thing to do, not because you didn't agree, you sabotaged it or you weren't willing to modify your processes in order to support our students. And we shared a ton of data and we were doing Completion By Design and Achieving The Dream and our Quality Enhancement Plan all at the same time. And there was just so much data. And then we shifted into disaggregating it all and people were seeing, oh my God, for real, that's our numbers.

(15:46):

And we're like, yes. I heard a president from a larger institution at a completion by design reunion a few weeks ago, and he was talking about data bombs and how they explode. And once they happen, you can't turn away. You can't not look, you can't not know. And I think all the resistance in the world couldn't combat that. Here it is. Here it is. At the time, we had like 14% of students getting through Dev Ed and through Gateway math. So I think that was, all those things were ways in which we kind of address the resistance. And then you've got to come behind. You can't just say to faculty, you need to create a culturally responsive classroom, or you need to build in support along the way. For students who might've gone into gen ed previously, you've got to provide the professional development so that they know how to do that. Then that's one thing we've struggled with both our student success initiatives and our equity initiatives is, and partly because we are a little ahead of the curve often, and so there's not a big bunch of literature or there's no colleges that you can point to that says, look what they're doing. They're doing it. So we build the plane as we fly. So it's like, okay, what are the high impact practices? What are the things that are starting to look like promising practices, and how do we get our faculty engaged in that work?

Researcher (17:28):

Yeah, it's hard to go first sometimes.

Dr. Benevolence (17:30):

Yeah, it is.

Researcher (17:32):

So for those colleges that are looking and looking for other community colleges that have gone before, what advice would you give a community college executive leader or president who's saying, we just got the data bomb, or we just started looking at equity gaps. We just started looking at this, you all have demonstrated some success in this area. What advice would you have for them? Where do they start?

Dr. Benevolence (18:09):

Well, I mean, I think the fact that you're willing to talk about it at all is a good thing. I mean, I have lots of friends across the system, and when I was going through my doctoral program, I was in there with lots of people who worked at community colleges and some of them in similar roles as me now. And there are a lot of colleges that just won't talk about this stuff. So to me, that's one big step is that you want to know, you want to be transparent about the data and you want to address it. I think you want to do it in a way that, and this happened with both student success and equity conversations. You want to do it in a way that you're not pointing fingers and saying, y'all were doing something wrong, because if you do that, then you're not going to get anybody on board to try to work and move in a different direction. So I think being willing to talk about it, disaggregating that data, trying to find any patterns that might be easier to address than others, looking for that low hanging fruit, getting those early wins, finding those champions.

(19:32):

We've had four, five, maybe six individuals who've led Equity Champions, and they are sort of more in the middle of the institution, or most of them have been sort of middle. Sometimes they can lead things a whole lot better than we can lead things, they're a little closer to the people who have to do the work. So finding those people on your campus, giving them a little stipend, giving them a little release time, whatever it is. But you often do have people who are very passionate about the work and sometimes, again, just better coming from them than from us. And we recognize we were an institution that when we were doing completion by design and things like that, we had a lot of external partners and we could bring somebody in to talk to our campus about something and people would be all over it and they would want to get engaged with it, but if any of us said it, they wouldn't. So we recognize we're kind of an institution that sometimes you need to hear it from somebody else.

Researcher (20:44):

You're going into my next two questions. We're going to split it up. Alright. So every community college is unique. The question here, you sort of touched on it a little bit, and then the second question is about external stakeholders, but this one is about what you feel makes this community college unique. What about it has lended itself to the way you lead equity work and advancing equity work- size, location, political landscape, being near larger cities, how does this look?

Dr. Benevolence (21:21):

So I do think size has been one thing. I mean, I think smaller colleges struggle with resources. They don't necessarily get invited to participate on things because the impact's going to be small.

And now sometimes that's not beneficial to a medium one either, because looking, we've certainly been passed over for grants that they're looking for major impact and we'll never get it even if every one of our students did what we want them to do. But I also think because we're medium and not large, it's much easier to bring people together. We all know each other. I mean, pretty much, I know most everybody on this campus and most people know each other. Every once in a while, somebody will be like, who's that? And I'm like, what? But for the most part, we know each other. We call each other by first names. I think we're a laid back culture.

(22:20):

We have been very fortunate though, to have external resources. So we have had lots of grants. We don't have as many now as we used to, but as we were laying the foundation for a lot of our work, we had a lot of resources. And so that has helped. You're able to give people professional development. You're able to bring people here. You're able to pay stipends to people. We have a Title Grant now, which has been instrumental in the faculty professional development piece and the establishment of the Center for Teaching and Learning. I think we're a very transparent culture, and I think we've demonstrated over time that nobody's going to get fired unless they're doing something really bad. And so I think a lot of that paranoia early on when we started looking at data, I mean, people were like, I teach a really hard math class and my pass rates and my retention rates are not good. And when you start looking at me under a microscope, I'm going to be gone. And it didn't happen. It didn't happen. And so I think there's been some trust established over time.

(23:30):

I think we all work really well together too, in terms of leadership. And again, I worked three years in another community college and it was very siloed. And here, we sit around the table and we figure out who needs what and who can give up what. And we've got a pretty good focus on, at the end of the day, we care about our students. We're not going to battle each other or get into any kind of matches. So who's more important than the other? We're all important. We're all working for the students. And then I think we've made some really good hires. We've got good people in some of the right roles.

Researcher (24:18):

The second part of that, which you sort of touched on was about external resources of course, but external partners even in the community. Can you talk a little bit about what the partnerships look like? Are there any community groups also focused on equity work that you've been able to partner with?

Dr. Benevolence (24:33):

So I mean, I think we do a lot with our K-12 partners because we have Upward Bound and Talent Search. And so Talent Search is the one that's in our city schools, which are predominantly minority students. And so that sort of focuses on getting students through high school and on to post-secondary here or somewhere else. We want them just to go. And so that's one thing that we've done, Upward Bound is in the county schools. It's not got quite the numbers, but it's a much more sort of intensive program. So I think they're aiming to get more. Talent Search is 500. It's middle school and high school, Upward Bound is 60, just high school, but same kind of goals. And then about a third of our students are dual-enrolled students. We've got

technically three innovative high schools, two early colleges and a career academy, and then we've got a ton of CCP students.

(25:44):

I still think we have equity concerns there, though. We still see in our CCP numbers that we are not reflective of the school populations, and we try to have those conversations with them. Sometimes we are working with three or four different school districts because sometimes you have success and sometimes you don't. To address equity, there's got to be a sort of a collective approach, and that's the only way we're going to have the impact we really want. But yeah, I mean, we've done some community things. We, for a while, when I was the vice president of one of the campuses and we started a program. A college promise program, and we have definitely seen that impact on who's going to college. So in the county you've got major extremes in income. So you've got an area that is wealthy, wealthy, wealthy.

(26:58):

And then you've got the not wealthy. Matter of fact, poor over here on this end. And so when the past president became president, he came from a school system, and there was just some chatter over there about starting the College Promise program. So since I was vice president of that nearby campus, it was me. There was also a woman who works in the economic development space, and her focus was kind of on how do you make the county and the community a place that people want to live in? And that educates their folks to retain talent for development. And then we had the president of the foundation, the community foundation there, which raises a ton of money. This is a community that puts a lot of money into the initiatives that the county feels like are important. And so we started this program.

(28:10):

I think it was 2020. When you graduate from a local county high school, as long as you've lived in the county, let's see, I think since ninth grade you are eligible for some free tuition. If you've been there all your life, you pretty much get free tuition. So we had a goal of reaching $3 million and we raised $3 million. We had a partner meeting this morning. So that I think has made a huge difference in that county. And I pulled some data afterwards for them. And since the program launched, we've seen a decline in a number that are going to neighboring community colleges. So I was just pulling some data so we could see what the pattern of numbers looks like for the neighboring college and students that are coming out of our county.

(29:10):

And it's gone down by over a hundred students since we started the college promise program. The neighboring college does not have a lot of African Americans in their school system, but they do have a lot of Hispanic students. And those students are coming, they're going to college now, and there's now a college going culture. Even if they're not coming to us, they're going somewhere else. So they're seeing so many more in terms of percentage of their students going to college somewhere. Most of them are coming to us.

Researcher (29:45):

I think that's one of those high impact practices

Dr. Benevolence (29:47):

And we have a new superintendent now in that school district, and we are hoping to partner and make an impact.

Researcher (29:58):

Yeah. That's huge.

Dr. Benevolence (30:00):

It's huge. It is.

Researcher (30:02):

Well, part of what I'm also challenged to do is to sort the qualitative data I get from the interviews and to also look at documents that support what I learned in the interviews. And you did mention the strategic plan. Is there anywhere else you would point me to see some supporting pieces around what you've shared?

Dr. Benevolence (30:31):

So on our website, you can get the strategic plan. I think our equity page is public, but it may be intranet, I can't remember. But we do have an equity statement. We've got an equity page. Let's see. We have a strategic enrollment plan, although it's a little outdated, you could probably look at a previous SEM plan. And we had goals in there that were specifically related to African-Americans, or I think they were mostly Black students.

Researcher (31:24):

Well, this has been very helpful. Thank you so much.

Dr. Benevolence (31:26):

You're welcome.

Dr. Whittington- Walk Humbly Community College

Researcher (00:02):

Okay. If you could describe to me the equity and diversity initiatives that your community college has put in place since you've been here.

Dr. Whittington (00:14):

I would say since I've been here, we've been really committed to improved outcomes for students, particularly minority males and our Hispanic student population. Before I came here to Walk Humbly Community College, they were already selected for the MMSI grant. So we do have a success coach that we have here on staff. That Success Coach provided direct support and provided oversight for our WHCC Men of Distinction program. That's an initiative that we have here on our campus for minority males to assist them in leadership, growth, development, mentoring, and our success coach position was responsible for serving as the advisor for that program. So that's one thing that, honestly, our initiatives to support minority males were already in place. But I would say since I've been here, we've worked strategically to strengthen them.

Researcher (01:18):

Okay. And how long have you been here in your role?

Dr. Whittington (01:21):

Actually, next month, March will be three years from me.

Researcher (01:23):

Three Years, okay. Yes. As part of the Minority Male Success Initiative program, are there any pieces that you all have put in place or that you find that might be unique to this community college?

Dr. Whittington (01:42):

I would definitely say the WHCC Men of Distinction Program, because that program, the Success Coach meets with students every month. They have monthly events. They have activities where we bring in speakers to provide motivation to our male students. Our success coach uses Watermark, our retention tool to monitor student performance. And all of our minority male students are assigned to that success coach. So our success coach is alerted of any grade or attendance issues that our minority male students have, and they can intervene as needed, as well as celebrate accomplishments. So it's not just about the success coach addressing performance issues with our minority male students. It's also recognizing when they're doing well inside the classroom as well as outside the classroom. I would say that's a big component of it.

Researcher (02:39):

Great! What personal beliefs and values or experiences do you hold that you feel contribute to your commitment to advancing equity here?

Dr. Whittington (02:48):

I think just myself, being a minority first generation college student, I understand how higher education can change lives. So when I came here, I was committed to seeing that this institution does everything that we can to help our students be successful because we know all of our students have challenges, some have more challenges than others, but oftentimes it's having that one person that can guide them and provide them with the resources, give them the motivation, recognize when they're doing well, so that they continue to want to progress and complete. So personally, it was a vested interest in being a first generation college student and having a wonderful admissions counselor when I was in college that motivated me and encouraged me to be the best student I could be. And complete.

Researcher (03:44):

In what ways do you get feedback from your black students, black faculty, black staff, about their experiences here?

Dr. Whittington (03:53):

I would say as far as for our employees, we do have a survey that all employees are asked to complete every year. So that, I would say, is a way that the college gets feedback from our minority employees. That information, as a part of the leadership team, our president, makes a concerted effort to ensure that we do what we say we do, and it starts with our employees. So that information is not just collected, but practices are modified as needed to ensure that we are meeting the needs of our employees. And then for our students, we also have satisfaction surveys that students complete every semester to assess the level of support and resources that we provide, and we use that information to modify our services. I would say one thing in particular, a great example of that would be one of the unique things about WHCC is we're one of very few schools, actually, I know it kind of initiated other schools to do this, but we're one of very few schools that provide free transportation for our students to WHCCC, and prior to coming here, the transportation program provided transportation to students, and they had to meet at certain locations in the county to receive transportation to the college.

(05:24):

But of course, with COVID, we saw it more than ever that if students couldn't make it to our campus directly, then they could not make it to these [dedicated] locations to get transportation. So we partner with the County Transportation, who provides our transportation services. So now our students, which primarily most of our students that do ride transportation through us are minority students. They get transportation from their home to WHCC free of charge.

Researcher (06:00):

When would you say that started?

Dr. Whittington (06:01):

That started from their home to WHCC...? Right around the time I started, we were looking at the data and we found that students in their intake surveys were reporting to us that transportation was a barrier. And while we had transportation services, we always had [open] spots available. Students weren't taking advantage of it. So upon further conversation with students and reading our data, the issue was that they couldn't get to these locations. So we worked with the County Transportation to address that issue, and now there's a waiting list.

Researcher (06:35):

So was that in 2020 or 2021?

Dr. Whittington (06:38):

That would be... I came here in 2021, we implemented it. I started in January, and then in April, April is when we implemented from home to campus. And we've been doing that since I've been here, and feedback has been excellent.

Researcher (06:58):

Wow. So that's an example of a great practice change. So something very practical that students needed and you responded to. Is there something like that that you would say when you look on the policy side, whether it's academic policies around probation or things like that, or grave

forgiveness? I'm just throwing a couple of things out there. It doesn't have to be any of that, but any policy changes that you think have really made a difference?

Dr. Whittington (07:25):

I would say one particular policy change is for our SAP [Satisfactory Academic Progress] with our financial aid students that are on financial aid probation, and we're of course working with them to get them off probation. One policy that we implemented is they have to do a minimum of 10 hours, whether that's in our Student success center, or we have a student support services program that offers free tutoring. That's one change that we have made that we've noticed has reduced the amount of students that had to go on financial aid suspension. We were able to address some of the issues that were putting them on financial aid probation before they lost their financial aid. So I would say that's one practice that we've implemented within the last three years since I've been here.

Researcher (08:24):

That's a good one.

Dr. Whittington (08:26):

For sure.

Researcher (08:28):

When you think about operationalizing, whether it's something like the practice of the transportation, the free transportation, or the policy of the financial aid piece, with the 10 hours in success center or tutoring, what kinds of barriers as an administrator in your role did you face?

Dr. Whittington (08:51):

I would say particularly because of covid, [pause...cleared throat] excuse me. One of the challenges we realized is we had to be flexible on the hours, because with covid, like many institutions, we experienced a lot of students that just did not feel comfortable coming back to campus. So one of the operational changes that we did make as far as the 10 hours are concerned, the tutoring could be virtual tutoring or in-person tutoring. So we tweaked our policy because we didn't want our policy to be a barrier to students, so we gave them options. In addition to the virtual tutoring, we did utilize our HEERF (Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds) money to also provide laptops and hotspots for our students. So if they didn't have access to those devices or internet at home, they were able to get those services here free of charge as a student. So again, we wanted to do everything we could to eliminate barriers for our students.

Researcher (09:54):

What about internal resistance?

Dr. Whittington (10:00):

I think with anything, I think some people have the belief that sometimes when it comes to students, that mentality of 'all students have challenges'. But our president was quick to respond

that yes, 'all students have challenges, but some have more than others, and we want to make sure that the playing field for our students is equal'. So he kind of nipped that right in the bud.

Researcher (10:34):

All students have challenges, but some more than others. Yeah. What advice would you give community college presidents or executive leaders at other community colleges that have equity gaps larger than yours?

Dr. Whittington (10:53):

I would say don't just look at the quantitative data, but look at the qualitative data. You can learn so much from it. I give that, again, go back to that example of transportation. Our students are reporting that transportation is an issue, and while we provided transportation, students weren't taking advantage of it, and upon further investigation and further conversations with students, we realized that they couldn't get to those [designated] locations. So I think that that's just a perfect example. Data is important, but you have to look at, as a college president, you need to look at the qualitative data too. Not just the quantitative, not just the numbers, because the numbers only tell a portion of the puzzle. Listen to your students as well as your staff, the staff that are on the front lines, working with the students so that you can make a concerted effort to address the challenges that your students experience. That would be the biggest advice that I would give.

Researcher (11:55):

Well, each of the community colleges I'm talking with, all of the community colleges are very unique. What characteristics of this community college, whether it be geographic, location, size, political landscape, what kinds of things shape the way you strategically lead for equitable student success?

Dr. Whittington (12:16):

I think the biggest thing about our County, we are a very rural county. Poverty is a significant issue in our community. So we understand here at WHCC that resources are such a key. Resources are such a key. There's so many homes without internet. We did a survey not too long ago to assess the types of internet access in the community and in the households, and I can't remember the percentage offhand, but a significant...was a very large amount of our community does not have internet access. And high speed is definitely not even an option for most of our students. So anytime you receive funds, and we're fortunate to receive funds, and we have a great county that we work with in helping us secure funds, we have to do what we can as an institution to help provide the basics. I mean, I think sometimes for many communities, especially many employees, we may take the internet for granted, but there's so many of our students that don't have internet access.

(13:40):

So using HEERF funds and continuing, even now that we don't have any HEERF funds, we're still continuing those services and supports for our students. Our students still can check out hotspots from our library to be able to use at home if they're taking online classes. Students are still able to get free laptops. Students are still able to utilize free transportation. So I think those are things that we're cognizant about in the area we serve that is very limited when it comes to resources, and we have to do what we can to help provide the basics. Food insecurity is another

issue that we have in our community. So there's so many challenges. So I mean, we have a food pantry that we keep here in our WHCC Student Center that's open for all students to receive support. We have food drives that we partner with local nonprofits to have food drives on campus to help address food insecurity. So I consider WHCC more than just an educational institution. We're a place of hope. We're a place of, if you're not sure what to do, this is where you come.

Researcher (15:06):

I love that.

Dr. Whittington (15:07):

Because I mean, I think as educators we understand if students can't take care of their basic necessities, how do we expect them to learn? So I think we take that to heart here by the services we provide.

Researcher (15:26):

You talked a little bit about partnerships. Who do you consider are your key external stakeholders that impact the way you lead when it comes to the needs your students have, and your equity and success initiatives?

Dr. Whittington (15:44):

I definitely say the county. I mean, the county has been phenomenal. I don't know of any, even before I came here to WHCC, I didn't know of any community college that has a county that provides the support that we need to be able to provide free transportation to students each week at a very affordable cost for the institution.

Researcher (16:12):

Can you talk a little bit more about that partnership? You say you guys share that. So who's paying for the vehicle? Who's paying for the drivers? Who are they employed by? How we pay

Dr. Whittington (16:21):

For everything. We pay a flat fee per student to ride it. And I mean, I can't remember. Yeah, it's nominal. The fee is nominal, but the county pays for all the drivers, pays for all the vehicles. I mean, it's phenomenal.

Researcher (16:40):

Okay. And is that built into their annual budget or do they receive some type of grant or?

Dr. Whittington (16:46):

I think from time to time, the county does help receive a grant to offset the cost of providing that service, because they provide the service to all county residents. They provide transportation to doctors' visits and all that kind of stuff.

Researcher (17:01):

So that is an extension of a program that I've heard of, things like that. That's good.

Dr. Whittington (17:07):

But I would say the county would be the biggest one. Yeah, I would say county.

Researcher (17:15):

Okay. Yeah, for the way our funding model is set up in our State. That makes sense. The county is responsible for many of the services, including our buildings and things, so that makes sense. So which college documents would you point me to that may be on your website or something I could get my hands on that sort of communicates some of the things that you've talked about in terms of your college's commitment to these equity initiatives and basic needs for students. Is it like the strategic plan?

Dr. Whittington (17:50):

I would say strategic plan, of course. Our QEP report.

Researcher (17:54):

What is your QEP focus this time?

Dr. Whittington (17:57):

Oh gosh. It's WHCC Skills, it addresses communication support. It's like five different things that the QEP addresses, but yeah, I would say the QEP, our student services page on our site talks about our counseling. We have information on our website about the WHCC Men of Distinction Program. Of course, I forgot to mention, and I know Ms. Stapleton will talk about that a little bit in more detail, but we have our Latino center also too, for our Hispanic population providing support and funding for students.

Researcher (18:38):

And that's a physical space?

Dr. Whittington (18:39):

It is a physical space. They provide scholarships, they assist students with enrollment. Yeah, a whole bunch of stuff.

Researcher (18:50):

Do you all have a separate diversity and equity plan?

Dr. Whittington (18:54):

We don't have a plan, but we have a committee. Our human resources director is over our DEI committee.

Researcher (19:03):

Okay. Excellent. Is there anything else that I didn't ask you that you think I should know about that makes this community college special and what may have helped you all achieve these successful student outcomes?

Dr. Whittington (19:20):

No, I mean, I just think that we have good people. I was fortunate when I came here to WHCC. I mean, WHCC doesn't have a lot of turnover. So you have people here that have been here for many, many years that are committed to this community and are committed to providing what our students need to be successful. So I think that's another thing that makes us special and drives us all to do what we do each day to help ensure that our community has what they need. And I think that's why the quantitative data show that we're closing the equity gaps. Because even, and I'm not sure if you're aware of this, we did not get the MMSI grant, but when we had the renewal, we were not selected, but our president said, while we were not selected [to receive the funding], this is important to our community, this is important to our institution. We will continue this position. So I think that speaks volumes.

Researcher (20:27):

It absolutely does. Well, thank you so much.

Dr. Whittington (20:30):

Thank you.

Dr. Carrington- Walk Humbly Community College

Researcher (00:00):

When did you begin as president of WHCC?

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (00:01):

2019.

(00:14):

You just met the "reason why" we are having so much success. Well... but she's doing a fabulous job. Absolutely fabulous job. But it takes a village.

Researcher (00:19):

Yes, it does. Can you describe overall what you would say your diversity and equity initiatives here are at your community college?

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (00:28):

Well, as a community college we are an open door. And so, we reach out to everyone. I mean we are very inclusive in regards to how we recruit. And we recruit intentionally and we market intentionally because I mean if you're reaching different demographics, you don't reach them all the same way. That's right. You've got to be intentional. And I think you've got to tailor your message. And then like I say, when you do get them here, you have to treat them right. When

you come in, we're going to take a personal interest in you and it's not going to be a shotgun approach. It's going to be something very intentional because what one student needs, this one may already have. And it could be transportation, it could be that a student is a flat tire away from not being able to attend school and we don't want that to happen.

(01:34):

We're going to figure out a way to make a way. I think what we do really well here, as a small school, but I think what we really do well is one-on-one counseling and learning what the situation is. If you don't know and if it's something small, we'll figure out a way. Like I say, the car breaks down. That may not be an issue for me, but that's an issue. It's a short-term issue for me. And it's a long-term issue for some students. They're living that close to the edge.

Researcher (02:15):

You talked about the one-on-one approach, which you're very fortunate to be able to do. Like you said, being small. How do you gather feedback or what kinds of things do you use to know what your employees need, what your faculty, what your students need, and particularly minority populations, black students?

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (02:33):

Well, I'm engaged. I like to say I'm engaged with our students every day. There's not a day that goes by that I won't walk in every building and at different times and just to make myself available. I like when students say, Hey Dr. Carrington, they know me. I like that. And so, you just sit and talk with them and so you have to be available and you say your door's always open, but even if you say your door's always open, folks may be reluctant to come. Not many students come to see the president. I get out and I go where they are, kind of meet them where they are. We know what that means, meet them where they are. Sometimes it's around the drink machine, over at the WHCC Cafe out in the common area. Just pull up a chair and sit and talk. It can be informal and just kind of speak with them where they are.

Researcher (03:32):

The informal, relational approach is huge. And I can see that even by the way you greeted me and the way we're talking.

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (03:38):

It's so important that we welcome people to this campus and then show an interest. I don't think it's anything we learned in school. I think we learned that at home.

Researcher (03:52):

That's right. That informal piece is there, now formally, I mean, you are president of the college and there are policies and things you have to take to your board. Which policy changes or policies do you think are in place here that make the most impact on these student outcomes we're looking at?

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (04:10):

Well, I will tell you, I don't know about policies, but our board, every board meeting, they want to know what the demographics look like. They want to know what the breakdown is and we share with them information similar to what you shared with me. And they want to see the retention. They want to look at all groups, minority males, minority females, whites, Hispanic. They want to know all of it. And then they will track back and say, well, you're up here a little, but you're down here. And so that's the accountability part because you start looking at the numbers. The numbers don't lie. You start looking at the numbers. And then if you're starting to see a trend in the wrong direction or in the right direction, you start to see it trending up. That's good. We're doing something right. If it's not, what are we missing? Then you start to make adjustments and you become even more aggressive and more intentional to reach out to a specific population.

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (05:26):

We were going to change our format for our board meetings and we did. And then, boy did they let me know, "what about this"? "You left this out", and it was this part. We want to see this. We want to see this part because it's important to us. And I look at our board, if you haven't looked at our board, our board's very diversified. And so, it's not that we're here or there, but we are diversified and we look at all our students, Latino students or we have a large Latino population where we have to serve them as well. We want to serve them. Absolutely. They're in our service area. We're going to serve them. Same thing. I mean every group. And so, I led with we are an open-door institution, we want everyone, we want everyone to come and be a part. If you exclude any group, we're not fulfilling our mission.

Researcher (06:25):

As you operationalize things that maybe you hear informally from students because you have relationships and you say, I listen, I heard that and I believe we need to pivot here. Or like you said, be intentional and make adjustments. How do you handle if there is any resistance to what you see needs to happen?

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (06:47):

Well, I try. I mean really try to, if I see there's a need for change, and it could be a small change, it could be something as small as well, the student came in and we greeted them and then we put them in a lab to do assessments. Now we don't just need to stick them in the lab in front of the computer for the next hour to do assessments. Let's do something a little more. It's a contact sport. Let's be a little more engaged with them. Then it's going to be, come over here and sit down. Because a lot of these students, you sit in front of the computer and it's going to be like, I don't know where to go from here. So, we don't want to frustrate them 10 minutes after they get on campus. So that transition needs to be a little softer.

(07:35):

And I'll go to our folks, I'll go to Dr. Whittington and we'll sit down and we'll talk about how we process them when they come in, what is their first 15 minutes? What's their first 20? So right, right out the gate, let's don't drop them. Don't start turning them away, right? They're going to have enough roadblocks and we just got to help them maneuver that path. But I just want it to be a smooth transition. I want them to know that, hey, we are here for them. I want them to have a phone number and an individual they can call. And just following up with that, even our

instructors, you haven't seen a student for two different class meetings. You need to get on the phone and find out what's going on, send them a text, do whatever. But you have to make contact and that one contact can make a world of difference.

Researcher (08:29):

Now I'm going to go back to the resistance piece, though...

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (08:32):

The resistance? I'm president and I'm going to do the things that I think we need to do. I sit down and I talk with our folks, and I will talk with our staff and ask what do you think and what's the best way to approach this? And then we will kind of come together, and it doesn't have to be my way. I just want it to be an effective way and then we'll adjust as necessary because I'll tell you right now, I don't know as much about what Dr. Whittington does than she does. Right? She's hired to do a job. So, I listen to her as I do my chief financial officer, my business manager, all those folks. That's what they do. And I'm just trying to navigate the ship and keep us between the ditches so to speak, and get the right people in place and then support them. That's key.

(09:30):

The Lord knows they don't want me making all the decisions.

Researcher (09:34):

They probably say, we got it, Dr. Carrington, we need, what do you want to see over here? And then we go take it and go.

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (09:39):

I want to see our students succeed. That's it. And you figure out how to get there, but I'm going to support you, but I want to see our students move forward and persist and succeed and I want to be able to shake their hand at graduation.

Researcher (09:52):

Yes. What advice would you give other community college presidents or executive leaders who are working toward these types of student success outcomes?

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (10:05):

Like I said, be intentional. Be intentional with your approach. You have to have the right people, you have to support them. And you can't be too quick to judge. Sometimes a semester won't do it. Sometimes you may implement a program and it may take just a little bit to get its legs under it and start building momentum. Don't be afraid to make changes along the way. This approach that you roll it out and this is how it's going to be and you try to cram that square peg in the round hole where it may need trimming, it'll sand it off a little bit and put the right people in the right place so they can be successful.

Researcher (11:03):

How often does your entire campus hear from you about your expectations?

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (11:10):

At least every other month I go to department head meetings and sit with them over at the cafe and with a group, whoever shows up and sit and talk. I find that informal sessions are better. The informal conversations are better when they can tell you what's on their mind. A lot of times folks get in the large group, they quiet right down, but if you sit with two or three, they'll tell you what's on their mind. And I want them to tell me what's on their mind and give me ideas. I told them when I interviewed for this job, if they were waiting for me to come up with every bright idea, it was not going to be good. Together, this is something we're going to do together. I'm going to give you a way to communicate, a way to make all the suggestions you want to make. And then we're going to weed through them and see what we can do and what we can't. And if it's good enough, we'll make a way. If it's good enough, we're going to figure out how to pay for it.

Researcher (12:32):

Funding is usually one of the barriers that colleges face and each college is unique. When you think about this community college's geographical context-rural, the political landscape, the size, you talked about how you can go in there and find your pockets of people and have these conversations. How do you think those things shape the way you lead culturally?

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (13:05):

Well, I'm from this part of the State. I grew up an hour from here, so I kind of understand where we are. I embrace it. I don't want to be anywhere else. I don't want to be in Charlotte. I want to be right here. And I just feel like that if you're small, more agile, you can turn it around faster than a larger school. A larger school is hard to really, it's like a battleship and a rowboat. We could spin this baby around if we need to and make adjustments. And I think the overarching idea or what I try to do is cultural. The culture of who we are and how we go about doing what we do and take pride in what we do and we want to be effective.

(14:05):

You take that effectiveness and you translate that into dollars. A community college has enough change of student body just by the way it's designed. It's a two-year school. And so, you're changing. In a perfect world, you're changing half of your student body every other year. Now it doesn't happen that way, but still it could change that fast. It is hard to maintain the culture and have a strong culture. So, when the new ones come in, the new students come in, they see this is how it's done here. And that first example, I mean, when you drive off the road, I want to see pine straw. I'm going to see flowers when it's time to have flowers. I want trees trimmed. I want the facilities to be clean. I want it to look just perfect, doormat straight in front of the door. That's twisted...But I want it straight. That's the way it's supposed to be.

Researcher (15:04):

That sends a message.

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (15:06):

We do everything the way it needs to be done and try not to cut any corners.

Researcher (15:11):

Yeah, that's good. Who are your key external stakeholders, the groups that you depend on to help you get things done around here?

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (15:22):

Like I say, I've got a good board. They're engaged with what we do. And it depends on what's going on as to who I call and some give me counsel, some give me great ideas. So, it depends on what's going on. And if it's workforce development, I know who to call. So, my board, we have a great relationship with the county manager, with the board of commissioners, the superintendent, and the board of education. We are all on the same sheet of music in trying to make this county the best it can be because I want the [k-12] schools to succeed because that helps us succeed. We're partners and the commissioners, like I said, they support us not just with the handshake and the pat on the back. They fund us. And so, it's really working well right now.

(16:48):

But it could change. I've got some relationships with some people and so I can pick up the phone call and they'll answer. It's important.

Researcher (17:02):

Sure. When I take a look at part of what I'm doing in collecting the quantitative data, I gather the qualitative data, which we're talking about now. And then I want to take a look at some documents to corroborate what we're talking about, some of your documents online and some of that. So, point me in a direction. Is it like a strategic plan? I'm going to look at your board. I haven't done that. That was a great suggestion.

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (17:25):

Yeah, look at the board. I would think that if you go to the website of student services, I think you'll see the strategic plan. I hope we'll make note of who we are and what we do and why we do it. I hope it's there everywhere. I do. I hate to say it, but I can't tell you exactly where to go, but I say it shouldn't be hard to find. It shouldn't be hard to find if it is hard to find. If it's hard to locate, we'll have to make adjustments. I mean about two clicks is all you need to do. We went through a total revamp of our website 18 months ago and we're still tweaking it because sometimes things get buried.

(18:21):

Yeah, well it was here before, where is it? And you have to find it and get it back where it's supposed to be. And I think that happens anytime you're scrolling on that website. But yeah, our website should tell the story because we do a lot, quite a bit of online and Covid took us there If you open up 10 sections of English 111 and the online classes fill up fast. So you wind up having to add another section online. But I have seen an uptick in face-to-face interaction. I would love to have more students on campus. I would love to have them all on campus. It's just that college experience. But I think some folks, I mean I have kids and I mean they're grown. They do well online. I've never taken an online class. I don't want to do it online. I want to sit in a classroom with people and learn from them. It is, like I said, different generations.

Researcher (19:31):

Well, I certainly will go to your website and go right to where you sent me, to the board reports, student services page and all of those to really back up a lot of this. This has been really helpful, insightful, and I'll do my very best to put it together in a case study that depicts the great work that you all are doing here.

Dr. Carrington, President of WHCC (19:54):

Well, and like I said, it takes a village. And some days you win, some days you lose. But just keep coming back, trying to make it better. And that's what we do here.

Researcher (20:04):

Thank you so much.

Ms. Stapleton- Walk Humbly Community College

Researcher (00:00):

All right. So if you would, can you describe the equity and diversity initiatives here at this community college? How would you characterize them?

Ms. Stapleton (00:15):

I would say that we work very hard to make all of our students feel included as far as addressing any barriers, any issues, any apprehensions that they may have about coming to a community college. We previously had the Minority Male Mentoring grant, which we don't have that money right now, but we still have a student success coach who focuses on that group because we know that that's a group that may have their own unique challenges in trying to make sure that they can overcome any obstacles that they have to come to school, or to get the training that they need for employment or a career, or educational advancement. I would say that was one of the first initiatives that I recognize as being different and unique. When I came to work here we realized that we also have a very large and growing Latino population here in the County.

(01:41):

We started to address that segment of the population because some of them are in very underserved and hard to reach pockets of the community. So, we reached out, we were able to get some grant funding to help with addressing some of the unique challenges that they have with trying to come to school, especially our undocumented students, and trying to let them know that we will help them figure out a way to come to college or to achieve whatever their goals are. And we try to do that outreach beginning with Early College, because a lot of them realize if they are undocumented, that when they graduate from high school that they're going to be faced with out-of-state tuition. We created a Latino center here on campus because we found we were sending students all over campus to find someone that could translate for them if they spoke Spanish.

(02:46):

We have really grown our bilingual staff as far as making sure that we even have a bilingual financial aid counselor now over in admissions. Most of our bilingual staff are housed in the

Latino Center though. But at least then when people come in, they know that they can go to one place and someone's going to understand them and be able to get them to the right place without them having to go from building to building. We want a one-stop shop if we can provide that for them. We have a TRIO grant that covers a lot of different areas as far as even reaching down into middle school and being able to recruit and begin the recruiting process there. Ultimately, that's our goal.

Researcher (03:44):

Is that Upward Bound?

Ms. Stapleton (03:45):

Yes. And student success. We're very fortunate to have that grant funding. We have our Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act, the WIOA funds where we work with economically disadvantaged students through their adult program and try to help them find the necessary funds and the wraparound services to be able to come to school, and complete their training goals.

Researcher (04:20):

As Chief of staff. I can tell that, I mean, I've interviewed the other two that your knowledge of all of the comprehensive services that you are kind of pulling them all in for me. I appreciate that. I want to learn more about a couple of them,

Ms. Stapleton (04:39):

ok

Researcher (04:39):

I'm interested in your role and in your, what do you believe your personal values or experiences are that you're passionate about your work. I can tell. So that makes you passionate about equitable outcomes for students?

Ms. Stapleton (04:56):

Well, yes. It's personal for me. I mean, when I was a senior in high school, I was a first-generation college graduate myself, so I have a heart for those students that are trying to find their way when their parents didn't go to college. But that was the one thing my dad told me, you will go to college, you will get a degree. That was never debatable for me. During my senior year in high school, my dad got laid off from the company that he had worked at since he was 20 years old. So, all of a sudden, he was unemployed. My mom had never worked. She'd been a homemaker. But because he had lost his job, I qualified for Pell Grant. I also got academic scholarships.

(05:59):

Financial aid helped me get through college. I remember my dad went and got food stamps whenever he lost his job. I never knew that until years later because he hid it from me and my siblings. He was afraid that we would be embarrassed. There was a stigma attached to it. I've always had a heart for people that find themselves in that situation because a lot of times it's due to no fault of our own.

(07:12):

I just ran into so many situations with people and after seeing what I had to navigate through to get myself through school and get myself on my feet, it just sparked my passion for helping the underdog. I've just been passionate about helping people that fall between the cracks as far as your parents are not wealthy, where you don't have to be concerned about how you're going to pay for your education, but yet you may be eligible for Pell Grant and homeless and your husband's left you and you can't see the light, leading to the end of the tunnel.

(08:43):

I like going after programs and funding that address all of those needs that people have.

Researcher (08:54):

Now, does the foundation fall under your leadership?

Ms. Stapleton (08:56):

Well, technically, Dr. Carrington and I share that responsibility. We do have a grant right now through the Anonymous Trust that is flowing through our College's Foundation, and that's for our Latino students that are faced with out-of-State tuition. It also helped fund part of a position for a recruiter to go into those underserved areas to recruit. The students want to talk to someone that they feel like is approachable or that they can identify with. We try to look at all the areas of the county to make sure that our message is getting delivered everywhere.

Researcher (09:46):

And how do you know, in your position, in what ways do you get feedback from Black students or employees or community members that are telling you what the needs are? How do you go about that?

Ms. Stapleton (10:03):

A lot of it is informal. You can do surveys, and we've done surveys. They've gone out through our institutional effectiveness office and we do evaluations at the end of courses. We have advisory committees that meet, and they're very diverse groups that come together, made up of community members and stakeholders and should be reflective of the community that we serve. But a lot of it comes informally when a parent walks through the door and gives you feedback, or you run into someone in the grocery store, or they send you a message on social media. And I follow a lot of that because all of our marketing and advertising falls under me. I'll look at all of our social media outlets and see what the comments are and look to see if we are getting feedback from all representation of the demographics that we serve in our community.

(11:09):

Where are our holes in our game? What do we need to hit a little bit harder as far as being able to reach everyone and make sure everyone feels like they are being included and represented, and that they are getting across the stage at graduation? That's ultimately the goal. We're in the process of creating a new commercial for tv and people don't realize the amount of work that goes behind the scenes to do that little 30 second commercial because we try to make sure that we have all of the demographics of our students represented within the commercial because that speaks volumes to people that are watching. We try to make sure not only in our advertising, but hiring of our staff and faculty. We have to make sure that we are reflective of the demographics of our community. I think that's very important.

Researcher (12:22):

Thank you for pointing that out.

Ms. Stapleton (12:25):

We are always looking at our community college dashboards to see what we look like as far as the percentage of our Caucasian versus our black versus our Hispanic. We also have some Native American staff. We try to look at that, and then we look at our neighbors, our neighbors as far as the other colleges to see where we are ranking. We actually look pretty good as far as mirroring our student population.

Researcher (12:52):

That's why I'm here.

Ms. Stapleton (12:55):

Someone asked us last week how we were attracting bilingual staff, and I said, well, honestly, when you hire one or two, they know other people and your network grows.

Researcher (13:10):

Well, you've got to hire for diversity, but they've got to be supported. And then they'll tell other people, but you can't hire 'em and not support 'em.

Ms. Stapleton (13:22):

I don't really know how that works.

Researcher (13:25):

That's not what you do?

Ms. Stapleton (13:25):

That's just not what we're about. It is not. If people tell you otherwise, then we need to know because we want to make sure we address it because that's our thing. We don't, that's why its kind of bothers me whenever people say, well, what are you doing to serve your Caucasian

students, your Hispanic, your black students? We're trying to serve everybody. Everybody. And I hope that people see that.

Researcher (14:00):

Now you mentioned addressing it. If it doesn't happen every now and then, there may be someone who may not feel or they may bring to your attention or somebody on your staff's attention that they have additional need or maybe need a more intention. The question here is, do you have an example of, have you ever sensed any resistance to what you're trying to do in that way? And how did you operationalize a new plan or a new way forward to serve students?

Ms. Stapleton (14:35):

I think probably the most resistance that I have encountered in my career has been towards the Latino students. And that's going back prior to even my job here, because we encountered this at another college that I worked at. And there's just this perception in the community, and it has been very challenging to address it because honestly, they are probably some of the most appreciative of their education of any students that I've ever served in my career. And they don't take any of it for granted. They appreciate it. And that's a very touchy hot political subject right now, not just at work, but even in my personal life. I'll encounter that from time to time. So, I've heard people make comments, but at the same time when we're an open door, we're going to serve everyone, but there are cultural differences with everyone that people just have to realize, and a lot of times it's creating an awareness and opening minds.

(15:55):

There are times when students come through the door that people will judge based on appearance or dialect. I think that things are good here. We're in a good place. I think that people are much more receptive and welcoming and inclusive than you would expect in a small rural area. And I think that a lot of the tone begins at the top and that we have to make sure that the message is conveyed campus wide because we've had some internal struggles as far as, well, this is my classroom. I don't want it used when I am not in class. Well, we run a weekend college too. It's open to everyone, but we do have a lot of our bilingual students that will come on the weekend for electrical, cosmetology, manicuring training because working during the week, so they're willing to come on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. We have a large weekend program.

(17:53):

We've had to find additional space and then we've had instructors have had to share space where that's not been the case in the past.

Researcher (18:04):

I was going to ask you, you answered what I was going to ask about practice or policy changes that you believe have had an impact on the success. And not every community college has a weekend college program, that is, they may have weekend classes that are sort of here or there, but not sequenced in that way. Is that what you're describing? You can do it all on the weekend?

Ms. Stapleton (18:28):

Yes, you can actually. They can get their cosmetology license by coming on the weekends. They can get their electrical license by coming on the weekends.

Researcher (18:36):

And I learned about a transportation program that you have that's free. Does that extend to the weekend?

Ms. Stapleton (18:41):

It does not, but what we are trying to do through the Anonymous Trust grant is create some relationships with some folks here in the county that are willing to work with us on our transportation challenges that some of those students may have. And also, with their lodging because we have students that drive hours to get here for a weekend program. We are trying to work some collaborative agreements with some of our local hotels right now and those efforts are underway.

Researcher (19:14):

Now you mentioned something that I haven't heard before, and so this is going to be a learning piece for me. You mentioned an anonymous Trust Grant...
(19:23):
Can you tell me how that's different from other types of grants?

Ms. Stapleton (19:28):

They're another organization that's actually called Anonymous Trust . When they realized what some of the colleges were trying to do to serve the Latino population, then we were able to go forward with a grant application. We received funding as did a few other Community Colleges in our State.

Researcher (20:42):

What advice would you give? I'm interviewing community college and executive leaders at these community colleges that are already seeing successful outcomes for minoritized populations. What advice would you give other community college presidents or people in your role across the State or even nation who are working toward closing the equity gaps you all have?

Ms. Stapleton (21:09):

I think it's important that they spend a little time on the front lines learning their student population and talking with their students and finding out what their needs are and what their challenges are. I think sometimes it's easy when you're in leadership, and I hate to even use the term flying at a higher level, but sometimes you find yourself removed from the trenches. And I like to think that that's what we do well here is we get back in the trenches to find out what's

happening on the front lines so that we can better address and we better know what the needs are and we're not oblivious or have blinders on about what is going on. We have worked towards having a mentoring program for new employees, new staff and faculty. I think that it would be good for our students to have mentors from upper level to lower. I think that it's important because when you leave high school, you're not necessarily still in the same clique. I received a call this morning from someone wanting to come to our adult high school program, and they want to make a connection because at the end of the day, it's really all about

relationships.

Researcher (22:57):

Each community college is unique, and as I came on your campus was very well kept. It drew me to the middle of campus where I didn't talk to any students of course, but just watching and observing. What do you think the characteristics are of this community college that shape the way you lead and your passion for equity? When you think about the size of the college, it being rural, the political landscape of this area, what do you think is the mix that's working?

Ms. Stapleton (23:36):

Well, we went through a rebranding about the time that covid and the pandemic hit and we just sent out surveys. We sent a very quick and easy to complete survey to staff, faculty and some of our community stakeholders. And the question was, what are the three words that come to mind when you think of WHCC? Three words. And we used the feedback we got from that survey to come up with our new campaign for our college. Family was the word that was used repetitively in the survey and people said it feels like a family here. I feel like I belong, I feel safe. And that was the message we were trying to convey during the pandemic. A lot of colleges closed during that time and worked remote and a lot of our faculty did. But those of us in leadership here, we stayed the course and we worked every day.

(24:51):

We wore a mask and we came to work and we just decided to take that time and really work on sending the message to the public that we're still here. We care for you. We're going to be here whenever you're ready to come back to school. And it paid off. It really paid off. We did a lot of marketing during that time. We put up new billboards, we did a new commercial, we really launched radio ads, and we just really spent a lot of time on marketing and trying to convey to the community that we're here, we're still family, you'll be safe with us or your children will be safe with us. And that's kind of the message that we try to drive home. And Dr. Carrington spends a lot of time whenever we have our forums and with staff and faculty and our meetings. We're family, but like families, we don't always agree. Sometimes we bicker and sometimes we agree to disagree, but at the end of the day, we support each other.

Researcher (26:08):

I have one more question. You've just given me so much to consider. Who do you think your key

external stakeholders are? Who helps you with that message here in this area, in the area you serve?

Ms. Stapleton (26:26):

As far as our champions, I probably would say our alumni, the people that have been here and experienced it firsthand, they're the ones that go back out and tell our story the best.

(26:40):

I mean, they've been here, they were students. Now they're out in the community and they're the best advertisers we could have. We always tell everyone, make sure we want to take care of our students, we want them to be successful. We are at graduation. We have our recruiter at graduation, getting information on our graduates, do you have a job yet? What are your plans? Because we don't want them to march across the stage and not know what they're doing next. If you don't have a job and you're not going to transfer, what can we do to better help? What do you need from us? We're not done.

Researcher (27:20):

That's right. That's right. When they graduate, you're not done. As I go and look on your website, and that's primarily where I'll look, could you suggest or send me documents of where I can find some of the exciting things you've been telling me about? Is it your strategic plan? Do you have a diversity and equity plan? Any annual reports? I know what your area sort of does, so is there any place I should go to maybe pull from? Of course, we'll redact any of the pieces that identify the college, but where can I find some good literature?

Ms. Stapleton (27:55):

It should be under our newsfeed if it's working, but let me double check. We had a glitch with our website last Sunday, and I just talked to our webmaster Friday afternoon. We contract with someone that helps us with that. I'm thinking that he and our IT have worked out all of our bugs, but I need to make sure that that's still running. But you could look on our Facebook. Our Facebook is full of information about things we have going on, about happenings and also upcoming events and any news, and sometimes we'll do stories, spotlight students and alumni. So, Facebook is probably the best. Honestly, that's probably got more information than our website. We have a lot of followers. That was one thing that we really spent a lot of time on was amping up our social media presence where everyone is, they're going to look for your Facebook before they look for your website a lot of times.

Researcher (28:59):

You're right about that. Thank you. I will definitely go there and the newsfeed on your website and I'll be able to find that.

Ms. Stapleton (29:09):

And that's supposed to be linked to our Facebook and supposed to have it at the very bottom, I believe.

Ms. Stapleton (29:17):

If you have any trouble, let me know you've got my card.