

CREATING AN ACTIONABLE EQUITY PLAN

An Exemplar from
Santa Monica College

THE PROBLEM:

Well-intentioned college equity plans that lack the specificity to drive change

THE SOLUTION:

An actionable plan with a clear stance on racial equity and an approach to cultural change

Strategic plans that are stuck at the level of rhetoric are all too common—but Santa Monica College (SMC) broke this pattern with an exemplary student equity plan. This report presents the key elements of that plan, as explored by the University of California’s Center for Urban Education.



CENTER *for* URBAN
EDUCATION

The Promise of California's Community Colleges

California's community colleges have long been engines of access and opportunity, an open door to higher education for students across the state, especially racially minoritized students. But with less than half of California community college students transferring or finishing a credential within six years, too often that access does not translate into success.

Thankfully, the state and many colleges and universities have made a serious commitment to addressing this problem. Seeing that racially minoritized students suffer the greatest inequities in college success, colleges have mandated racial equity on campus with ambitious targets and calls to action built into equity plans.

One of these leaders is Santa Monica College: SMC's equity plan is clear, bold, and actionable. The Center for Urban Education (CUE) has a long history working closely with colleges and their equity plans, and they are sharing the key elements of SMC's exemplary plan here, with the hope that it can spur others to follow suit.

How many California community college students finish a credential within six years?

Overall rate: 48%

White: 53%

Asian: 66%

Black: 38%

Latinx: 39%

How many transfer within six years?

Overall rate: 38%

White: 41%

Asian: 54%

Black: 34%

Latinx: 29%

CUE's Racial Equity Approach

Founded in 1999 by Estela Bensimon, the Center for Urban Education (CUE), now part of the Race and Equity Center at the University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education, helps individuals learn to see institutional racism and dismantle it, one practice at a time. To do this, CUE has developed tools and approaches to empower faculty and staff to become equity-minded practitioners who have an awareness of race, racism, and how higher education policies and practices may perpetuate inequities—coupled with a willingness to be responsible for eliminating those inequities.

One way CUE supports this work on campuses is with Racial Equity Institutes focused on teaching, hiring, and writing and implementing equity plans. These multi-day institutes use a hands-on approach to first teach what racial equity means, and then provide actionable strategies to increase it.

The Plan: Santa Monica College's Commitment to Racial Equity

Since Governor Jerry Brown proposed legislation to fund and support student equity in 2014, SMC has been actively implementing programs and interventions to address equity gaps. They've also been engaging with CUE, and have attended all the institutes offered as well as additional workshops. Their 2019 Student Equity Plan is a clear culmination of many years of work, and a reflection of the college's authentic focus on racial equity and their commitment to performing better for Black and Latinx students.

Throughout the plan, student success is set up as the responsibility of the institution—not the student—and SMC continually notes past failures to recognize and serve racially minoritized students. The purpose of the plan is to build a more equity-centered campus where leadership, faculty, and staff are all oriented toward equity in all facets. The plan builds on an equity framework for the college, with an actionable set of activities and initiatives.

CUE identified six key elements that make this plan exemplary—these elements are explored in the following pages with examples from the plan.

This is followed by a checklist to review your own student equity plan, or to guide the development of a new plan that leverages anti-racist thinking, language, and action to address equity and structural racism. The year 2020 has shown us that rapid, major change is possible: we must channel that same level of action and resolve toward racial justice in higher education.

On the first page of their report, SMC leverages CUE's equity-minded competencies as a foundation for their work.

To become a more equity-centered campus, SMC must:

- Become race-conscious and aware of racial identity
- Regularly use disaggregated data to identify racialized patterns in outcomes
- Reflect on racial consequences of taken-for-granted practices and policies
- Exercise agency- and self-monitoring to produce racial equity
- View the institution as a racialized space



Santa Monica College faculty meeting at the CUE Student Equity Planning Institute in March 2019.

1

Embrace a Focus on Racial Equity

In several places in the report, SMC acknowledges that there are other minoritized groups to consider, but that racial equity is the priority. The report speaks to baseline data that shows that Black, Latinx, and Native American/Alaskan Native groups experience the largest and most persistent equity gaps, both in education and in the workforce—a powerful reality that strongly supports this focus on racial equity.

In the introductory section, SMC frames it this way:

Santa Monica College continues to see pervasive data across every student success indicator demonstrating that the College is not effectively serving Latinx and African American students specifically. SMC’s racial equity gaps are in direct conflict with the College mission to create a learning environment that both challenges students and supports them in achieving their educational goals. SMC proposes to actively pursue racial equity as a centerpiece to its educational mission, hiring, program services, institutional governance, and college planning processes. We believe that SMC can truly embody our number one in transfer slogan for ALL students by collectively committing to employ an equity framework that centers the lived experiences of our most marginalized student groups on campus.

What makes this exemplary?

The call-out of the conflict between the college’s mission and its realities sets the stage for a bold reorientation toward racial equity. “Centerpiece” is a powerful illustration of how this plan positions racial equity at the heart of the college, demonstrating that this is indeed a college-wide effort, not owned by a single office or group—and rooting it in the lived experience of students makes it all the more robust.

2

Accept Racial Inequity as a Problem of Institutional Performance

Throughout the plan, SMC adds weight to their commitment by courageously acknowledging that as an institution they have historically underperformed for Black and Latinx students. They are steadfastly focused on creating a culture of equity-mindedness that will result in change, rather than defaulting to a deficit-minded outlook that places the burden on the student and attempts to “fix” them, rather than the institution itself.

SMC acknowledges the dissonance between the student body and the whiteness of the institution itself:

The consistent and pervasive underperformance of SMC with regards to Latinx and African American students must be addressed with more systematic and broad reaching activities centered on confronting issues of race, discrimination, bias and oppression. While the College is considered a minority serving institution (Latinx and African American student population of 49%), SMC remains a predominantly white institution with regard to faculty (full time and part time), academic administrators, and classified managers.

And to address this, they’ve centered their plan on helping employees change:

SMC proposes to utilize the equity plan activities to equip all College employees with the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to discuss issues of race as it relates to campus culture and student success.

Additionally, in a list of core competencies, they include:

Disrupt deficit language when discussing racially minoritized; citing their issues as being the cause for any lack of success while at SMC.

What makes this exemplary?

All too often gaps in student outcomes are blamed on the student, and their readiness or willingness to succeed, and solutions for inequity are focused on adding services or programs. SMC takes full responsibility for racial inequity, and roots their entire equity plan in remediating institutional mindsets, policies, and practices.

3

Incorporate the Use of Inquiry to Remediate Practice

Rather than relying purely on data to find gaps and point to solutions, SMC has incorporated inquiry as a way to add nuance to their efforts to increase racial equity. Inquiry here refers to a systematic approach to reflecting on institutional policies and practices in order to identify why equity gaps are occurring. Inquiry can take many shapes, including data analysis, document review, and observation. By empowering practitioners across campus to use inquiry, SMC is making way for more informed solutions, based in deeper understandings of contextual issues and needs.

Learn more about action inquiry and CUE’s Racial Equity tools that support this approach [here](https://cue-tools.squarespace.com/) (<https://cue-tools.squarespace.com/>).

The second of the student equity plan activities is *Implement Inquiry-Based Process to Eliminate Equity Gaps*.

A key component of this activity is bringing together and training a team of practitioner-researchers to assess student support services and communications/marketing documents via observation, interviews, and document review. They describe the approach:

Action research brings together and trains practitioners (called “practitioner-researchers”) who are in positions to bring about direct change and make decisions to actively participate in assessment and evaluation of specific practices, policies and related documents, and programs.

The action research will involve equity-minded inquiry that assesses the effectiveness of services across campus through a racial equity lens, and answer questions such as “Are our African American students accessing the services of our office at the same rate as other students? Why not?” and “Do our marketing materials for our center speak effectively to the African American/Latinx population?”

What makes this exemplary?

This demonstrates that inquiry is embedded in the college’s continuous improvement process, and will remain part of the way they operate and evolve. Additionally, it empowers practitioners to investigate their own practices and see how changes might be made across all levels of the college to better serve and support students.

4

Focus Inward on Cultural Change Through Equity-Focused Professional Development

SMC is focused on changing from the inside out, meaning they're focused on how the institution can change by supporting its faculty and staff to learn and change. This is in contrast to a top-down approach that relies solely on leadership—committed leaders and a clear strategy are indeed critical to this change, but this focus on professional development ensures actionability and momentum, rather than solely structural change. Equity-focused coaching, workshops, institutes, and speaker series are all included as hands-on initiatives that will continually foster practitioner change.

Leading into their equity framework, SMC notes:

At the individual level the goal is for each member of the SMC community to become “equity-minded,” embracing equity as a core value and recognizing the ways in which they can help begin to work towards racial equity in the work they do every day at the College. To achieve this SMC will provide professional development to all groups, develop “equity core teams” in departments and divisions, and host all-campus events focused on racial equity and actively anti-racist praxis.

Building on this in the explanation of their equity lens, SMC includes core competencies that are key to meeting these goals:

- *Become aware of how implicit bias and stereotypes shape our interactions with students and peers*
- *Recognize and interrupt microaggressions when they are committed, understand the “death by a thousand papercuts” metaphor for individuals who endure these papercuts in their daily lives*
- *Create a culture where we recognize breakdowns in communication and “call each other in” as opposed to “call each other out” whenever possible*
- *Normalize conversations about race; do individual intrapersonal work on unpacking why there may be discomfort around issues of race*

What makes this exemplary?

By establishing early in the plan that the goal is for every member of the SMC community to change their mindset and the way they work, SMC avoids the trap of working or speaking at a removed, systemic level, and grounds the plan in individual change. Additionally, the use of the term “anti-racist” and the explicit core competencies listed add power and actionability—it’s not enough to simply not be racist: active dismantling of institutionalized racism is part of the job.

5

Use Equity-Minded Language in Documents and Daily Practice

By consistently using intentional, clear, equity-minded language in this plan, SMC sets a precedent that language matters. In multiple places in the plan, they note that research shows that language makes a difference in the impact of the message, and outline approaches to training faculty and staff to build new race-conscious, equity-oriented vocabularies.

On the first page of the report, SMC calls out the importance of language:

The keywords and terms used to describe the equity imperative at Santa Monica College centers language that refrains from blaming the student for the lack of successful outcomes. Language used in this document was selected to challenge SMC cultural norms and move toward an equity minded view of the campus.

This is followed by a glossary of key terms including: *diversity, equality, equity, racial equity, racially minoritized, equity mindedness, cultural humility, microaggression, privilege, power, oppression, unconscious bias, culturally responsive.*

Explore some of these terms in [CUE's Core Concepts of Racial Equity \(https://cue-tools.squarespace.com/s/Core-Concepts-of-Racial-Equity.pdf\)](https://cue-tools.squarespace.com/s/Core-Concepts-of-Racial-Equity.pdf).

What makes this exemplary?

Rather than assuming readers and participants share this vocabulary, SMC dedicated space to ensuring that these key terms are clear. This makes way for a more informed engagement and participation. Additionally, SMC continually notes the specific groups they are focused on—Black and Latinx students—and they don't default to vague language like “underrepresented” or “students of color.”

6

Implement Equity-Minded Data Use and Assessment

Data is critical to this work, as a way to benchmark and measure progress (or lack thereof). But it's important that data use and assessment are equity-minded, and SMC makes clear their focus on data is rooted in helping practitioners gain actionable insights, not just gaze at numbers.

In their outline of the Student Equity Plan Activities, SMC includes a plan for expanding equity data coaching to train faculty, staff, and managers to analyze student equity data and facilitate dialogue in the context of that data. They note that in addition to training practitioners on the technical aspects of calculating and analyzing equity gaps, this program will also deepen their knowledge and understanding of the historical and current context of systemic inequity in higher education, as well as:

- *Prepare practitioners to respond effectively to deficit-minded (perspectives that place the responsibility of success solely on students and link failure on the shortcomings of students) reactions to racial equity data*
- *Train practitioners to apply an equity-minded framework (perspectives that emphasizes institutional responsibility for inequities in student outcomes) in facilitating difficult data discussions at the program and committee levels, particularly around racial equity gaps*

What makes this exemplary?

Simply reviewing data to find equity gaps is not enough. SMC highlights the value of a more nuanced approach to data, and establishes a clear path forward with their commitment to training. Rather than leaving the data analysis to the institutional research team alone, they plan to involve a broad swath of the campus community, which contributes to their overarching goal of cultural change.

Reviewing Your Own Equity Plan

Use this checklist to review your student equity plan or guide the development of a new plan that leverages anti-racist thinking, language, and action to address equity and structural racism.

Element	Your plan should have ...	Make sure your plan does not have ...
1. Embrace a focus on racial equity	<p>A clear statement of focus around racially minoritized students</p> <p>Explicit language about which groups the plan is focused on (e.g., Black and Latinx students)</p>	<p>Unclear or broad statements about diversity and racial equity (e.g., “underrepresented minorities” or “diverse students”)</p> <p>A focus on “all” students as a means to reduce inequities</p>
2. Accept racial inequity as a problem of institutional performance	<p>Acknowledgment of how your institution historically has or has not served and supported racially minoritized students</p> <p>A focus on approaches that help faculty and staff become more equity-minded</p>	<p>Language that places the burden of change on the student, asking them to be “college-ready”</p> <p>A focus on creating structures or programs aimed at student change</p>
3. Incorporate the use of inquiry to remediate practice	<p>A clearly articulated approach to building the skill of and/or applying action inquiry</p> <p>A supported structure that allows faculty and staff to come together to reflect on their practices—both what is working and what is failing</p>	<p>An overreliance on data alone to guide action</p> <p>A tendency to jump to creating solutions before understanding why or how the problem is occurring</p> <p>A focus on “best practices” that may not fit your campus’s unique context</p>
4. Focus inward on cultural change through equity-focused professional development	<p>An outline of investments in equity-minded (or focused) professional development</p> <p>A calendar or list of activities, engagements, and tools for faculty and staff to become more equity-oriented</p>	<p>An overreliance on leadership and/or messaging to drive cultural change</p> <p>A focus on structural solutions or additional resources to solve racial inequities</p> <p>Race-neutral professional development</p>
5. Use equity-minded language in documents and daily practice	<p>A commitment to using equity-minded language</p> <p>An explanation of key terms</p>	<p>Deficit- or diversity-minded language</p>
6. Implement equity-minded data use and assessment	<p>Proof of or a plan for broad access to (and sense making of) disaggregated student equity data</p> <p>Guidelines to approaching data with an equity lens</p> <p>Clear targets in regard to closing racial gaps</p>	<p>An approach to data use that’s not coupled with an equity lens</p> <p>A plan for data use that is restricted to your institutional research team</p>

Thank You

CUE would like to thank Santa Monica College for being an ongoing equity partner and for providing us the opportunity to learn from their work creating their student equity plan. More specifically, we would like to thank the primary authors of the plan: Hannah Lawler, Dean of Institutional Effectiveness; Edna Chavarry, Director of Academic Affairs Initiatives; and Melanie Bocanegra, former Associate Dean Student Equity and STEM Programs.

Want to learn more about CUE or this work?

Contact Megan Chase, Research and Policy Specialist, megan.chase@usc.edu

Interested in reading SMC's full plan?

It's available in its entirety on the college's Institutional Research page:

<https://www.smc.edu/administration/institutional-research/student-equity.php>

How to cite this document: Chase, M. (2020). *Creating an Actionable Equity Plan: An Exemplar from Santa Monica College*. Los Angeles: Center for Urban Education, University of Southern California.