

Faculty Perspectives on Student Equity and Success for Students of Color at Palomar College



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About the Community College Equity Assessment Lab (CCEAL)

Mission

The Community College Equity Assessment Lab (CCEAL) is a national research laboratory at San Diego State University. CCEAL supports community colleges with research, assessment, and training activities that support the success of historically underserved students of color. The mission of CCEAL is to develop knowledge and advance promising practices that enhance access, achievement, and success among underserved students of color.

Objectives

- **Research** – to conduct and disseminate empirical research on the experiences of historically underrepresented and underserved students in community colleges;
- **Training** – to provide training that improves practices relevant to students of color in community colleges; and
- **Assessment** – to use assessment and evaluation to facilitate capacity building within community colleges.

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INTRODUCTION

The Community College Equity Assessment Lab (CCEAL) at San Diego State University was contracted by Palomar College to engage in a comprehensive assessment of the experiences of students of color (e.g., African American, Latino, Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, and Native American). The assessment entailed collecting quantitative and qualitative data from students, and qualitative data from faculty. This project is a part of Palomar College's efforts to redress persistent inequities and outcome disparities in student success that disproportionately affect students of color.

The purpose of this report is to share findings that emerged from the qualitative assessment of educators (faculty and staff) who teach and serve students of color at Palomar College. In line with the purpose of this project, inquiry was guided by the primary question: What are the experiences and perceptions of educators who teach and serve students of color at Palomar College? The inquiry was also guided by the following secondary questions:

1. What patterns of engagement have educators observed among students of color in their classes and departments?
2. What strategies have educators found helpful in facilitating student success among students of color?
3. What challenges do educators experiences in facilitating student success for students of color?

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This report is guided by the Taxonomy of Faculty Perspectives on Teaching Men of Color (Harris & Wood, 2015). The taxonomy of educators' perspectives on teaching and serving men of color model is made up of four categories: (1) The Choir, (2) The Allies, (3) The Resisters, and (4) The Defiant. The choir are educators who are aware of the difficulties that men of color face and are willing to employ practices that will help foster their success. The allies are educators who are unaware of the obstacles that male students of color face in an academic setting and/or have not developed the competencies that are necessary to serve them equitably, but are willing to learn and employ practices that will help them in their success. On the other hand, the resisters are educators who are unaware of the challenges that men of color face and are unwilling to employ practices to aid in their success. Lastly, the defiant are educators who admit to knowing that there are challenges that men of color face but are still unwilling to help aid them in their success. The taxonomy served as a guide to exploring how educators influenced the experiences of students of color at Palomar College.

Estela Bensimon's concept of "equity-mindedness" (see Bensimon & Harris III, 2012) also served as a guiding framework for this project. Equity-mindedness characterizes educators that exhibit four behaviors that advance equity-oriented policies and practices that best serve students who are disadvantaged by outcome and experiential disparities:

- (1) an awareness of exclusionary practices and systemic inequities that produce outcome disparities in educational contexts
- (2) an attribution of outcome disparities to breakdowns in institutional performance rather than exclusively to student deficits or behaviors
- (3) being continuously reflexive about their roles in and responsibilities for student success
- (4) challenging their colleagues to be equity-minded educators by calling out deficit sensemaking and advocating for policies and practices that advance equity.

METHOD

Participants and Data Collection

Data collection for this project occurred during the Spring 2017 semester. Faculty members who had experience teaching students of color were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews. A total of 11 faculty members participated in this project. Among the 11 participants were 9 men and 8 full-time faculty members. The participants represented a range of academic disciplines, including: math, ESL, media studies, and world languages (to name a few)¹.

All of the participants agreed to have their conversations audio recorded and were assured that the insights they provided would be treated confidentially by our project team. All of the audio recordings were transcribed for data analysis. The one-on-one interviews were facilitated with an interview protocol that consisted of semi-structured open-ended questions.

Prior to the interviews, we informed the participants (both verbally and in writing) that their participation was strictly voluntary. Participants were informed that they could opt out of answering questions they did not feel comfortable answering and could discontinue their involvement in the project at any time without consequences. None of the participants who began the project discontinued their participation. They did not receive monetary compensation.

Analysis

¹ To maintain the participants' confidentiality, we are not able to provide additional details (e.g., department, gender, race/ethnicity, time status) about the faculty who participated in the project.

The responses from the one-on-one interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Once all the interviews were transcribed, the Dedoose software was used to analyze the qualitative data via line-by-line coding. Dedoose enabled multiple researchers to work collaboratively on analyzing the dataset. Two researchers coded the data deductively by using a previously established codebook. Although we took a deductive approach to analyzing the data, we also sought concepts and insights that could not be adequately coded using our previously established codebook.

Limitations

Despite our efforts to conduct this project in the most methodologically rigorous manner possible, we encountered one limitation that is worth noting. The race/ethnicity of the educators was not recorded. Notable exceptions are a few participants who shared their racial/ethnic identity while responding to interview questions.

KEY FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

Five overarching thematic categories emerged from the interviews:

- Conceptualizing [In]Equity
- Faculty Perspectives on Barriers to Student Success
- Examining Faculty's Teaching Philosophies
- Building Relationships to Facilitate Success
- Employing Culturally Engaging Teaching and Learning Strategies

In the sections that follow, we discuss each of the categories and present the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that faculty shared to support the findings presented.

Conceptualizing [In]Equity

The interviews provided insight into the faculty participants' lived experiences that led to them developing equity-mindedness and the ways in which they conceptualize equity. These lived experiences and conceptualizations serve as the foundation of the teaching and learning practices they employed in supporting underserved students, notably students of color at Palomar. Regarding their lived experiences, nearly all of the participants had a personal connection to diverse identities, such as being a first-generation immigrant, being in an interracial marriage, or being involved in activist work on behalf of marginalized groups. The participants' connections to diverse backgrounds engendered a sense of empathy and compassion for diverse students that provided in impetus to work hard to eliminate institutional barriers that

threatened their success. Affirming students, sharing resources (e.g., scholarships, free books, outreach organizations), and being flexible with students who experienced personal problems were some of the ways in which the participants reportedly sought to eliminate barriers. The participants also recognized that systemic factors, such as poverty, inequitable schooling, implicit bias, and racist stereotypes of people of color are what produce and sustain inequities. As such, faculty were intentional in resisting deficit perspectives that are typically held of students who are most adversely affected by inequities. Finally, the participants who embraced equity-mindedness viewed eradicating inequities as not only important for diverse student populations who are adversely affected, but also because of the benefits that would be afforded to society. As one participant noted, eliminating inequities " . . . will lead to better success in our lives, it will lead to a better accountant to help me with my taxes, a better teacher for my children, a better plumber to fix my problems at home, a better engineer. . ."

Faculty Perspectives on Barriers to Student Success

The faculty identified various challenges that negatively influenced students' academic success. Poverty and financial pressures were common among both men of color and women of color. Help-seeking challenges were identified by the faculty as a barrier that was most salient among men of color.

Poverty and Financial Pressures. Poverty and financial pressures directly interfered with students of color's academic engagement and success. Faculty explained that usually students would not purchase textbooks for class because they were too expensive. Other students faced challenges with paying rent and were forced to live in unstable living situations or were outright homeless. Moreover, food and hunger insecurities were common among students of color making it difficult for them to concentrate in class. A constant struggle faculty perceived among students of color was the decision to pursue an education and "surviving." As stated by one participant, "They want to pursue an education, yet they still need to survive." Often times, when faculty were asked what campus leaders could do to further support their efforts to foster the learning and academic success of students of color, they emphasized an institutional need to address issues of poverty, especially food and housing insecurities. In the reflection below, a faculty member shared how current systems to address students' food and housing insecurities at Palomar could be enhanced to better meet the needs of student of color:

I could call it a brain food project and model on the very successful program out of Fresno City College. The person who established that actually got awarded by the State Community College Chancellor's Office. That is one way the college as an institution can support [students of color], some kind of food support for night [students]. I know they were

talking about some kind of food pantry but it is only during the day and it is also has all kinds of bureaucratic approval procedures to [access it]. Often times these procedures get set up as barriers, and people say, "what the heck, forget about it." You know, so it is not really trying to help people, it is really to say "we have something in place," but then it is not really making a difference.

Interestingly, economic hardships, such as food and housing insecurities, were discussed extensively by both men of color and women of color during the student focus group interviews of this project.

Help-Seeking Challenges. Help-seeking challenges among men of color was an observation that most faculty participants identified as another barrier to student success. Faculty recognized that men of color sought support less willingly and less often than other students. A faculty participant shared, "One thing we have learned from this work is that men of color tend to not ask for help as often as they should, perhaps as often as say women of color or other students." The participants discussed their efforts to support men of color in seeking help by being proactive and offering help and not waiting for students to ask for it. However, this was not an easy task, as faculty often found themselves challenged with finding a balance between being supportive without being overwhelmingly intrusive. The following reflection that was offered by one of the faculty participants exemplifies this challenge:

The referral to [support] services on a campus is of course an important one. But I think there is a big breakdown that occurs between making that referral and then seeing it through, without being able to pull them almost literally by the hand and say, "here it is, go visit". For them, there is a sense of inadequacy that sort of creates a shame cycle, they just don't wish to engage in, particularly if you know they're 25, 30 years old, you're suppose to have these basic skills figured out and you don't. So in a way, it's a real defeat or point of defeat or real obstacle to success for a lot of students who do struggle with these basic language skill issues, regardless of language background but I do notice that that's the case. Because frequently I will write on papers, you need to accomplish those better, you need those skills, those are the ways to do it, 4 options, pick one and perform it or you're not going to get through this problem and satisfy this set of skills that you need. And again that may account for what some of them just left out and disappear.

The reflection above sheds light to the complexities that are involved in encouraging men of color to seek help. Particularly, the faculty participant noted a gap between encouraging men of color to ask for help, and them actually seeking it.

Examining Faculty's Teaching Philosophy

The faculty participants were asked to discuss the teaching philosophies that guided their practices towards working with students of color. Faculty members illustrated two overarching ideas that guided their principles and beliefs, which were to be “firm, but fair” and to “prepare students for real life.”

“I am Firm, but Fair.” Faculty described the need to strike a balance between setting assignment guidelines for students to follow and being flexible to extenuating circumstances that could interfere with their academic success. A faculty member explained, “that is kind of what I enforce, there is no makeup on assignments unless, of course, there is extenuating circumstances.” Specifically when working with students of color, faculty shared that a balance between, being “firm, but fair,” was necessary for demonstrating authentic care towards students. The following faculty member described this idea:

You want to be firm but you also want to be kind. How do you do that? That is, so I think educators have to be flexible, in order to win this group of people over with their trust...otherwise if you're too hard-nosed about things, you turn them away and you probably leave a bad taste in their mouths about school...

The participants also explained that being firm, while also being fair, was necessary to prepare students for life. Likewise, faculty viewed the necessity of their teaching practices to extend beyond the classroom as a means to prepare students of color for life in general. This concept is further illustrated in the following section.

“I Need to Prepare Them for Life.” The participants discussed principles and beliefs towards holistically fostering the development of students of color. As such, they saw their engagement with students as not just about teaching them to master course content, but to also prepare them for the rigors of life, work, and school for those who desired to transfer. Faculty members discussed striving to prepare students with an array of skills, such as help-seeking, time management, communication, accountability, and responsibility. For example, the following faculty member discussed:

My perception is that a lot of students, and I don't think this is the different racial and ethnic groups that you're focused on, I think it is a class-based issue. I think that poorer students from socio-economic environments that don't have wealth or privilege aren't aware of all the ways that they can exert power and authority. Therefore, they don't have agency over how their life is unraveling. So they are not always used to being able to say

to somebody, “listen I have to have an exception to this assignment, I can't do it in the way you're asking.” Or they don't know that asking is a possibility, so modeling that, encouraging that prospect and trying to offer ways to make that happen. I think one way to bridge and connect with members of this target audience is to be aware that there is a problem that is going on and to be helpful in trying to solve the problem, versus just being another obstacle to a very busy and complicated life.

As suggested in the reflection above, helping students engage in effective help-seeking is a life skill that students from underserved backgrounds may not know how to navigate, therefore, guidance from faculty may be needed to develop this skill. Faculty members' teaching philosophies to be “firm, but fair” and to “prepare them for life” interrelatedly informed the culturally relevant teaching strategies and practices that they employed to working with students of color. The culturally relevant teaching strategies and practices that faculty members implemented are further illustrated in the following sections.

Building Relationships to Facilitate Success

The need to build relationships with students of color to facilitate their success was a theme that resonated throughout the interviews with the faculty members who participated in the project. Three relationship building strategies the faculty intentionally employ to facilitate success in teaching students of color were salient: (1) establishing trust and rapport, (2) validating students' experiences, and (3) engendering a sense of belonging.

Establishing Trust and Rapport. Establishing trust and rapport was a foundational strategy that faculty implemented to begin the process of applying culturally relevant teaching practices. Establishing trust and rapport with students of color varied from being intentional about learning students' names, to taking a personal interest in learning about students' cultures and communities. Regarding the importance of learning students' names, one participant noted, “I want to show those folks that I care enough about them to know their names.” Another faculty member, who identified themselves as a “White activist,” explained that supporting students of color required a deep commitment to students that starts in the classroom and extends into their communities.

I think that in order to connect with students of color there has to be a buildup of trust for a person like me to be able to connect and successfully advocate for and promote students of color in the classroom. I have been focused on building that trust in the community. I'm also very successful, so I'm a role model in many ways and I have tried to in everything I do on this campus, to walk the talk. Students have seen me

do that, you know I have been reprimanded by the college for my activism; I have been arrested for my activism. I'm not afraid to stand up for a student that needs someone to stand up for them. So I think, you know that largely goes outside of the classroom of course, but I think inside of the classroom it is, it comes down to taking a personal interest in the students own stories, and where they're coming from, where they are going, what they see for themselves.

While this colleague's approach was not widely practiced by the other participants, it is illustrative of genuine care for students that extended beyond the classroom and into communities that are served by the College. Demonstrating genuine care for students was necessary for faculty to successfully establish trust and rapport with students of color. Moreover, establishing trust and rapport with students was essential to validating students' experiences in the classroom and, ultimately fostering a sense of belonging.

Validating Students' Experiences. Validation is a concept that describes intentional and proactive support initiated by "institutional agents" (e.g., faculty, staff, counselors) toward students who have been historically underrepresented and underserved in education (Rendon, 1994). Validation is typified by messages that are conveyed by agents to students to build confidence, encourage students to believe in themselves and their abilities to be successful, and to let students know they are valued members of a classroom or campus community.

The Palomar faculty who participated in this project shared interactions they had with students that were, in many ways, aligned with the concept of validation. Faculty discussed the importance of "getting to know students and their stories," "acknowledging their presence" when seeing them around campus, and helping them navigate campus processes. Another component of validation is recognizing that the college environment is unfamiliar for some students and, thus, it is important to be patient and communicate with students in a caring way as they learn what is expected of them. For example, one participant noted:

"... school has rigor, school has academic requirements and expectations so how do you, how do you bridge that gap, you know, in a sensitive way, in a nurturing way, you know that is hard. These group of students, men of color, and women too, they are proud people too, and you cannot be condescending and you cannot just turn them away, you cannot communicate with them in such a way that you turn them away."

Another faculty member shared that they wrote positive notes and comments on students' graded assignments as a way to validate their effort and

encourage them to keep working hard, recognizing that students from underserved backgrounds often do not receive these types of affirmations from educators. Building trust and rapport and validating students' experiences are necessary to create a sense of belonging for students of color in the classroom.

Engendering a Sense of Belonging. "Belonging" is a psychological concept that captures students' perceptions of group cohesion in a learning environment (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). When students have a sense of belonging in the classroom, they are comfortable, authentic, willing to take risks, and embrace challenging learning experiences confidently. Because students of color tend to be marginalized in academic spaces, it is important for faculty to be intentional in establishing a classroom ethos that engenders their belonging. The following reflection in which a faculty member discussed the importance of engendering a sense of belonging exemplifies the participants' perspectives:

It is all about making students feel like this is their place; you have to make a comfort level for them. If they are comfortable with you and with their classmates, then the learning environment is like tenfold, right, but when we are anxious and nervous and self-conscious and concerned about others and what they think of me or if I belong here, then it is really hard. I mean you're kind of frozen you freeze up that ability to kind of learn, and in language learning you're already asking people to go outside of their comfort zone, you're asking them to be and do and talk something that they are not, so it is hard for language teachers to kind of get a really effective learning environment, if people aren't comfortable. So for me it is really about making people feel comfortable and for different people that means different things.

The participant's description of building a "comfort level" with students highlights the significance of building trust and rapport to create a sense of belonging for students of color. Building trust amongst students and faculty and validating students' lived experiences contribute to students feeling a sense of belonging in the classroom. Engendering a sense of belonging coupled with the application of culturally engaging teaching and learning practices (which are discussed in the section that follows) meaningfully contribute to students' success.

Employing Culturally Engaging Teaching and Learning Practices

The culturally engaging teaching practices that faculty members implemented were identified as the following: (1) connecting course content to students' lived experiences, (2) using inclusive learning assessment strategies, and (3) inviting students' ownership of the course. The culturally relevant practices that faculty members implemented were day-to-day activities that connected course

content to students' cultural context. The culturally relevant practices are further illustrated in this section.

Connecting Course Content to Students' Lived Experiences. One of the most widely discussed teaching strategies to support the success of students of color was finding opportunities to make the content of courses “culturally relevant.” This is best understood as connecting the course content to students' lived experiences by way of readings, assignments, and diverse speakers. A science professor who participated shared this example of infusing cultural relevancy while discussing his approach to teaching:

I bring colorful examples when I'm delivering my material, I mean people believe [science is] really technical and dry but you can bring human stories to it. You know whenever I'm talking about a particular subject I can give examples of the work I'm doing or have done and other scientists in the field are doing. So instead of giving an example about sending people to the moon we can talk about examples of people using this particular science to build solar cookers in the jungles of Central America, that kind of stuff. So there are lots of valid applications for people to think about how this subject can impact and benefit them and their communities.

Similarly, faculty participants talked about the importance of underrepresented students seeing positive images of themselves in the curriculum as a way to infuse cultural relevancy. For example, a media studies professor recognized that people of color are not well-represented in books, articles, websites, films, and other mediums. Thus, this colleague intentionally sought opportunities to expose students to films in which people of color play prominent roles.

I show movies that are focused on many of these identity areas that you are focused on. I try to encourage movies that have been directed by women, movies that have been directed by women of color, women who are of one sexual orientation away from heteronormative and so on. I try to look for images of Chicano experience historically and of the present, of Black experience, of so on. I'm sensitive to the fact that there are different things we can see to mirror a reality that may be unlike what is typical in Hollywood.

Using Inclusive Learning Assessment Strategies. Strategies to assess student learning in classes also emerged as a salient topic of discussion during the interviews with faculty leaders. The participants believed that exams and assignments that allowed students to contextualize their learning and connect course content to their lived experiences, were effective ways to assess learning that was aligned with equity-mindedness. For example, one colleague who

used personal narratives to assess student learning noted: “[E]ven in academic essays there is a certain amount of analytical skill that needs to be shown but it should be drawn from your point of view and then address all of the stuff that is required of an academic class.” The participants valued these approaches to assessing learning more so than those that are routinely used, such as “Scantron exams” and assignments that require rote memorization.

Inviting Students to Take Ownership of the Course. Finally, the participants talked about the importance of inviting students to take ownership of the course. Participants suggested that the more students had a vested interest in a course (beyond their final grade), the more likely they are to participate in shared learning.

The primary strategy employed by faculty to facilitate students’ ownership of the course was to invite their feedback and perspectives on what is taught and/or how content can be taught more effectively. One of the participants noted: “I often ask, ‘what would you do differently than what we did this last week?’ I’m constantly asking for resources and materials that would better express a subject that I know can be done differently.” Faculty leaders viewed students as co-constructors, rather than passive consumers of knowledge. For example, they believed that students were capable of offering valuable insights on how to enhance their own learning.

However, they also noted that faculty must be intentional in soliciting feedback. Participants recommended strategies like asking students to write down suggestions at the end of class, or taking time at the end of each class session to ask students about what worked well and what could have been improved. As exemplified in the reflection below:

At the end of the night, [I have a] way of feeling their pulse. I ask them, “Let me know how you feel about today’s class. Do you have any doubts? Do you still have things that are confusing to you? Let me know.” So they can feel like, “okay here is a teacher that cares.” And then the next day I will address those things.

In sum, the faculty participants were intentional in gaining students’ buy-in by encouraging them to not just see themselves as students in the course, but also as leaders who are responsible for the shared learning that takes place. Identifying ways to leverage students’ lived experiences by aligning with the content of the course and in assessing students’ learning also helped to create an ethos that best served students of color.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings presented in this report, CCEAL recommends the following next steps for faculty to advance equity and success for students of color at Palomar.

- Faculty should engage in professional development on using culturally relevant teaching and learning strategies to leverage students' lived experiences. In assessing faculty and staff professional development needs, the campus should consider utilizing CCEAL's Community College Instructional Development Inventory (faculty) and the Community College Staff Development Inventory (staff).
- Creating professional learning communities within each Division that are led by faculty with expertise in utilizing culturally-relevant teaching may offer ongoing opportunities to build capacity throughout the academic year.
- Faculty must be intentional in validating students, building students' self efficacy, building relationships, and fostering a class ethos that engenders a sense of belonging, particularly early in the semester.
- Faculty should make it a priority to get to know students on a personal basis at the beginning of the semester. Assigning short personal narratives or scheduling brief one-on-one meetings can provide opportunities for students to share with faculty relevant details about their backgrounds and learning strengths. Faculty should also be intentional about engaging students outside of class on non-academic matters as doing so helps to build relationships between students and faculty that facilitates help-seeking.
- Providing opportunities for students to assume leadership in the course should also be prioritized by faculty. Soliciting their feedback on how their learning can be enhanced and giving them some agency in selecting course materials and designing assignments can position students to embrace a shared responsibility for learning.
- Faculty should rely upon a broad range of learning assessments that recognize differences in students' learning styles and strengths. To the extent possible, assessments that enable students to leverage their lived experiences to demonstrate learning should be prioritized.
- Faculty should critically reflect upon their teaching philosophies and ask "To what extent is my teaching philosophy aligned with the principles of

equity-mindedness and institutional responsibility?” Faculty should also consider their own lived experiences with equity and diversity and how (if at all) these experiences are reflected in their teaching philosophy in ways that can foster student success.

- Counseling faculty should employ counseling-based interventions to address hegemonic masculinity, notably “breadwinner” orientation and apprehension to help-seeking among men of color.

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