



MEMORANDUM

January 25, 2020

TO: George Frasier and Marcie Sims, Co-Chairs, Green River College Strategic Planning Steering Committee for the 2021-2026 Strategic Plan

FR: MIG, Inc.

RE: Summary of Equity-Centered Best and Promising Practices

Introduction

Green River College's 2021 Strategic Plan process is centered on deepening equity and closing the opportunity gap for diverse students at the College. Green River is not alone in this; as racial and socioeconomic inequities are highlighted by recent events underscoring deep-rooted, systemic racism, and as the United States becomes a more diverse nation, educational institutions across the country are discussing the equity imperative for post-secondary education. This summary provides an array of concepts and successful practices for embedding equity in higher education to inform the strategic direction for Green River College's Equity-Centered Strategic Plan.

I. Laying the Groundwork: Concepts and Activities for Racial Equity Work

Laying the Groundwork: Concepts and Activities for Racial Equity Work is a compilation of inquiry tools developed by the Center for Urban Education (CUE) at the University of Southern California Rossiter School of Education to assist higher education practitioners deepen their equity work.

CUE's primary goal is to assist faculty, administrators and other college and university staff better understand the harmful effects of invisible forms of racism on their campuses and to embed the concept of "equity-mindedness" through socially conscious research, tools and learning institutes. Equity-mindedness is a "cognitive frame" or mental map of attitudes and beliefs. CUE asserts that redistributing resources and repairing broken structures are insufficient unless actions and efforts to assess opportunity and outcomes are implemented with "equity-mindedness."

Why Race?

Laying the Groundwork focuses specifically on race. Its rationale for doing so reflects demographic, economic and justice imperatives: the growing racial and ethnic diversity of the U.S.; the resultant need to close gaps in educational access and completion to support the country's economic future; and the requirement to address structural inequality and institutionalized racism to create a just system. It is also premised on the fact that socioeconomic class and income alone do not fully account for inequalities experienced by racially minoritized students¹ including Black, Latinx, Native American, and Pacific Islander students. As a result, to truly create and embed equity at colleges, there must be a focus on creating and supporting racial equity.

A crucial distinction is also made between “diversity” and “equity,” as shown in Figure 1 on the following page. When colleges focus solely on bring more diverse students into an educational pathway which is unequal due to existing bias and systemic racism, too many of those students are placed on a predictable course toward failure. Equity redirects resources to those pathways with greatest needs to fix barriers and provide intentional support.

It is noted that equity work requires practitioners to consider how race and racism manifest in actions at a personal level, perpetuating the cycle of racial injustice. Definitions and examples are included of racial microaggressions - brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group. Implicit bias is also defined in this resource as the process of associating stereotypes or attitudes toward categories of people without awareness.

¹ Following David Gilborn (2005) and Shaun Harper (2012), we use the term “minoritized” rather than minority to underscore what Harper describes as “the social construction of underrepresentation and subordination in US social institutions.” He continues, “Persons are not born into a minority status, nor are they minoritized in every social context (e.g., their families, racially homogenous friendship groups, or places of worship). Instead, they are rendered minorities in particular situations and institutional environments that sustain an overrepresentation of whiteness”. “Minoritized” thus reflects the fact that with few exceptions—historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) being the most prominent example—American colleges and universities were founded and designed to serve white students. At certain points we use the terms “people of color” and “students of color” to describe populations that are traditionally labeled racial and ethnic “minorities.”

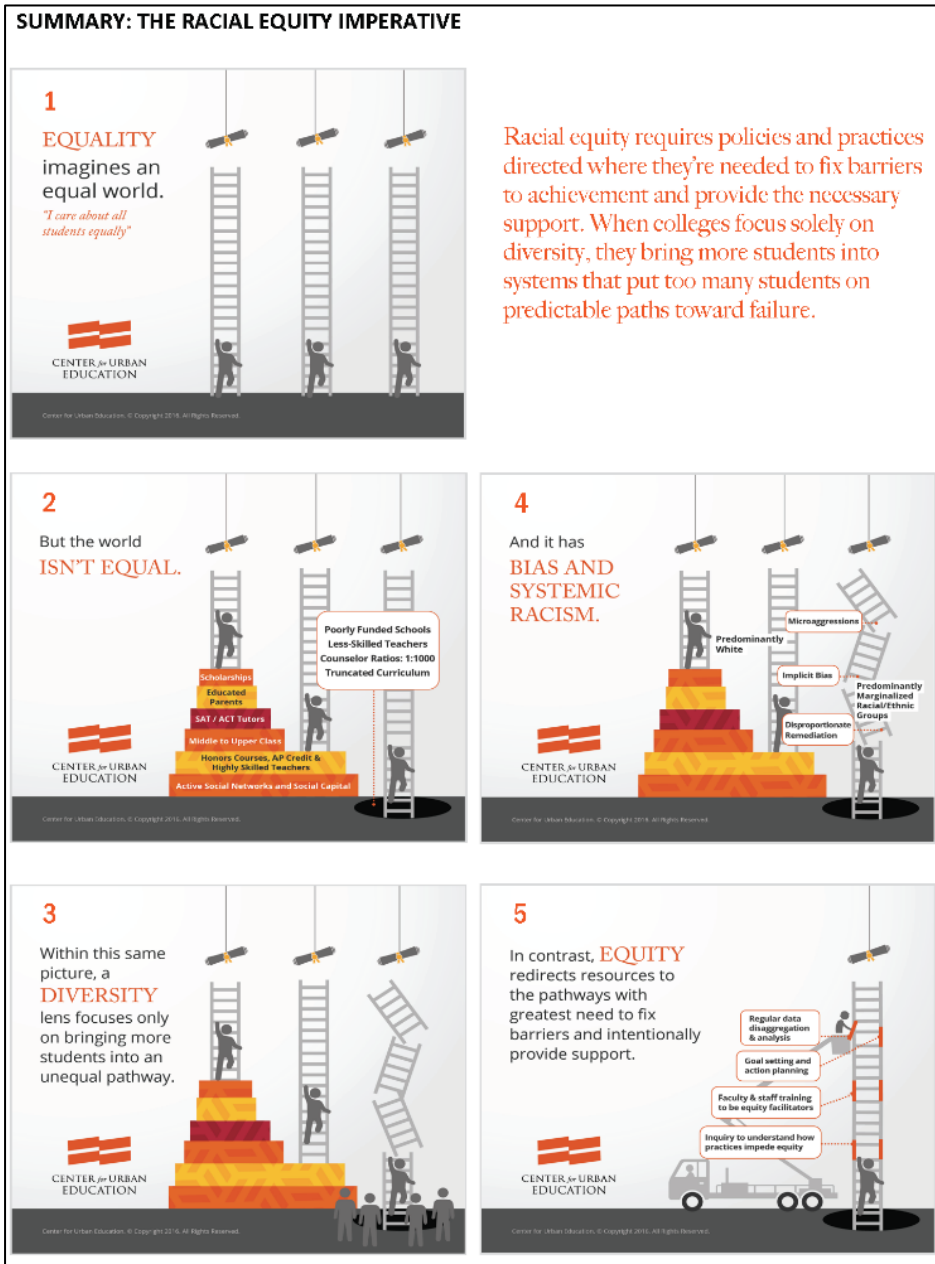


Figure 1: The Racial Equity Imperative

Why Equity-Mindedness?

Developing equity-mindedness requires shifting beyond “diversity-mindedness” (focusing on a demographically diverse student body) and “deficit-mindedness” (explaining inequities in terms of what racially minoritized students lack). Equity-mindedness reflects an awareness of the sociohistorical context of exclusionary practices in higher education, the effect of power asymmetries on opportunities and outcomes for racially minoritized students, and frames racial inequity as a dysfunction of higher education’s policies and practices.

Equity-minded practitioners are aware of their racial identity and racialized beliefs, expectations, and practices; take a data- and evidence-oriented approach to racial inequity; reflect on the racial consequences of institutionalized practices; and exercise their agency to assume responsibility for eliminating racial inequities in outcomes, attending to relationships and interactions with students to ensure that all forms of racism are minimized, and addressed when they occur.

Across higher education, policy and practice solutions to equity gaps generally take the form of small-scale compensatory programs or broadscale redesigns of existing structures and/or curricula. The report gives an example of opportunity programs offering services to help students who experience economic and academic barriers—such as need for remedial education—navigate and adjust to college. When designing such programs, it is crucial to investigate practices, considering faculty’s assumptions, biases and motivations, and reconfigure them in an equity-minded way. Bringing this process to the redesign of a remedial math program at the Community College of Aurora helped completely remove equity gaps in student achievement within two academic years.

Inquiry Activities

So how can this be accomplished? CUE suggests a range of self-inquiry activities that invite higher education practitioners to interrogate their own beliefs, assumptions, priorities, practices and programs, providing materials and discussion cues for each. They include exercises for:

- Finding your equity stance regarding your college’s role in addressing equity.
- Creating an educational history map to understand how your experiences impact teaching philosophy and practice.
- Identifying how equity is defined on your campus: which populations are focused on, what the goals are and how equity is approached in key institutional artifacts that signal campus priorities and values.
- Creating a campus equity history map to understand past and present efforts within the broader racial context of campus, city, region, state and country.
- Identifying deficit- and equity-minded statements and reframing deficit-minded into equity-minded statements.
- Categorizing statements expressed by practitioners in racial equity work that CUE has facilitated with four quadrants of CUE’s Equity Quadrant Poster (Student Deficit-Oriented vs. Institutionally-Oriented and Color-Blind vs. Race-Conscious).
- Considering how institutional racism may be embedded in policies and practices that perpetuate outcome inequities in order to discern how it may be playing out on our your campus.
- Building capacity for facilitating equity-minded conversations and navigating resistance to focus on race in equity work.

II. Step Up and Lead for Equity

In their report *Step Up and Lead for Equity: What Higher Education Can Do to Reverse Our Deepening Divides*, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU) clarifies how expanding access to quality education is the key to providing the universal access to opportunity promised by America’s democratic ideals. The report notes that opportunity in America continues to be disproportionately distributed, and the effects of this imbalance are evident in economic polarization, the decline of the middle class and decreased economic mobility. Educational and economic opportunity are closely intertwined, and the report provides data demonstrating how, at the same time that America’s demographic diversity is growing, the fastest-growing populations typically have the least access to these opportunities. Therefore, the path to economic success for individuals and the nation is to expand equitable access to high-quality postsecondary education, and higher education can take a leadership role in doing so.

Taking the Lead on Equity and Opportunity

Step Up & Lead for Equity provides another important distinction, between equality and equity. Equality is about sameness; it focuses on making sure everyone gets the same thing. Equity is about fairness; it ensures that each person gets what he or she needs. To effectively educate today’s students, higher education must focus on both equity and quality, and this approach begins with equity-minded leaders who make it a priority to build new opportunities for low-income students and students of color. Figure 2 clarifies five elements of what it means to be equity-minded.²

AAC&U’s focus is on the newest phase of its influential Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative—the LEAP Challenge to make excellence inclusive and ensure that every student prepares for and completes Signature Work, in which they “use their cumulative learning to pursue a significant project related to a problem he or she defines. In work conducted throughout at least one semester, and with faculty guidance, the student produces work that expresses new insights and learning.

Students’ completion of Signature Work³ provides evidence that they are ready to tackle complex problems in the workplace and in society.” They suggest that colleges gather

What Does It Mean to Be Equity-Minded?⁴

Equity-minded practices are created through

1. Willingness to look at student outcomes and disparities at all educational levels disaggregated by race and ethnicity as well as socioeconomic status.
2. Recognition that individual students are not responsible for the unequal outcomes of groups that have historically experienced discrimination and marginalization in the United States.
3. Respect for the aspirations and struggles of students who are not well served by the current educational system.
4. Belief in the fairness of allocating additional college and community resources to students who have greater needs due to the systemic shortcomings of our educational system in providing for them.
5. Recognition that the elimination of entrenched biases, stereotypes, and discrimination in institutions of higher education requires intentional critical deconstruction of structures, policies, practices, norms, and values assumed to be race neutral.⁵

Figure 2: What Does It Mean to Be Equity-Minded?

² Keith Lawrence, Stacey Sutton, Anne Kubisch, Gretchen Susi, and Karen Fulbright-Anderson, *Structural Racism and Community Building*, Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 2004).

³ In Signature Work, a student uses cumulative learning to pursue a significant project related to a problem he or she defines. In work conducted throughout at least one semester, and with faculty guidance, the student produces

representatives from across their institutions and engage them in self-study and planning about equity, inclusion, and excellence. They provide ten items designed to help guide such discussions and identify necessary action steps that have emerged from AAC&U's longstanding work on inclusive excellence and the LEAP Challenge. They ask colleges to consider: **Does**

Your Institution Do the Following?

1. Know who your students are and will be.
2. Have frank, hard dialogues about the climate for underserved students with a goal of effecting a paradigm shift in language and actions.
3. Invest in culturally competent practices that lead to success of underserved students—and of all students.
4. Set and monitor equity-minded goals—and allocate aligned resources to achieve them.
5. Develop and actively pursue a clear vision and goals for achieving the high quality learning necessary for careers and citizenship, and therefore essential for a bachelor's degree.
6. Expect and prepare all students to produce culminating or Signature Work at the associate (or sophomore) and baccalaureate levels to show their achievement of Essential Learning Outcomes,⁴ and monitor data to ensure equitable participation and achievement among underserved students.
7. Provide support to help students develop guided plans to achieve Essential Learning Outcomes, prepare for and complete Signature Work, and connect college with careers.
8. Identify high-impact practices (HIPs) best suited to your institution's students and its quality framework of Essential Learning Outcomes, and work proactively to ensure equitable student participation in HIPs.
9. Ensure that Essential Learning Outcomes are addressed and high-impact practices are incorporated across all programs, including general education, the majors, digital learning platforms, and cocurricular/community-based programs.
10. Make student achievement—including underserved student achievement—visible and valued.

III. Structural Equity: Big-Picture Thinking

Structural Equity: Big-Picture Thinking & Partnerships that Improve Community College Student Outcomes describes how four colleges that were finalists for and/or winners of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence created deep links to other sectors to help build structural equity through pipelines that lead to greater educational and economic opportunity among underrepresented students.

work that expresses new insights and learning. Students' completion of Signature Work provides evidence that they are ready to tackle complex problems in the workplace and in society.

⁴ Essential Learning Outcomes include: broad and integrative knowledge of histories, cultures, science, and society; well-honed intellectual and adaptive skills; in-depth engagement with unscripted problems relevant to both work and civic participation; and Signature Work, which can include a student's research, practicum, community service, internships, or other project-based learning.

Not only have these colleges worked hard to fundamentally reform internal structures and operations to align education and supports for students with their success goals, but they have also actively positioned themselves as part of a broader ecosystem of institutions acting in concert to transform students' lives. This was done by thinking big-picture about the needs of their communities and regions and then building partnerships to create seamless pathways from high school to community college and on to a four-year degree and a career.

- By partnering deeply with local school districts to build college aspirations and improve curricular alignment, **Santa Barbara City College** helped ensure that far more students—especially among the region's growing population of first-generation Latino students—not only go to college but start college academically prepared to succeed.
- **El Paso Community College** has helped to embed a college-going culture in the region's schools and developed alignment between high schools and the college that dramatically reduce students' need for remedial education.
- By intentionally analyzing student outcome data disaggregated by Pell eligibility, redefining measures of success to include students' labor market outcomes, and working intentionally to design programs that link to careers, **Lake Area Technical Institute** in Watertown, South Dakota, has not only completely eliminated disparities in graduation rates for Pell recipients but also ensured those students secure good jobs after they graduate.
- **Valencia College** in Orlando, Florida, by partnering deeply with the University of Central Florida, establishing structures that fundamentally change students' transfer experience, and embedding commitment to equity throughout the college and its partners, has more than doubled the number of students earning associate degrees since 2005, increased Latino students' completion rates by more than 10 percentage points, and dramatically improved the rates at which low-income and underrepresented students go on to earn bachelor's degrees after transfer.

How have these colleges achieved these successes? The report concludes by summarizing the three main strategies implemented, along with a series of essential practices for achieving each.

- **Strategy 1: Think Big Picture to Redefine Student Success and Set Equity Goals**, involves working to understand who your students are and the opportunities existing for them in local and regional contexts; relying on data to set big-picture goals and define strategies extending beyond the college; and then defining specific measures for benchmarking progress.
- **Strategy 2: Work Externally to Change the Student Experience**, involves identifying vital external partners; devising strategies that speak to both partners' needs and goals; establishing common metrics for progress and success; creating structures for communication about curriculum alignment and skills expectations; and establishing conditions in which all partners are accountable for success.
- **Strategy 3: Work Internally to Build Urgency and Commitment to Equity Goals**, is accomplished by creating systems for regularly analyzing and discussing data;

celebrating wins to build success upon success; and continuing to evaluate success and revise goals and strategies accordingly.

IV. Online Learning

The COVID-19 crisis has exacerbated already existing socio-economic challenges among low-income students and students of color, leading to alarming decreases in enrollment and financial aid applications, and increases in dropouts among those already in college.⁵ The switch to online learning has been particularly challenging for these students.

Specific issues that impact online learning include lack of bandwidth and/or equipment; unstable housing or homelessness; lack of technological skills and digital literacy; language and cultural barriers; time zones; and the need for personalized accommodation and support to achieve academically during rapid transitions online due to pandemic onset. Other vulnerability factors accentuated included: physical and/or learning disabilities; sickness or stress due to pandemic; caregiving duties; socio-economic and immigration status; and students' race or ethnicity, gender, culture and religion.

The article *"Online Learning during COVID-19: 8 Ways Universities Can Improve Equity and Access,"* published on "The Conversation" website (theconversation.com), recounts how an international collaborative research group sought to better understand how universities planned to ensure all students would have access to online learning and would be able to participate as courses moved online. By analyzing publicly shared resources from 78 educational centers in 23 countries about how instruction could transform and address educational equity in online learning. They identified emerging best practices but also heard that universities have a distance to go in understanding how to address racism online.

Recent current events catalyzed protests and calls for systemic change and made addressing system racism a priority, and universities asked to produce guidelines and recommendations to address systemic racism online as quickly as possible—but creating effective measures that result in positive change requires careful consideration and answering many unanswered, difficult questions.

The analysis revealed eight priorities to ensure an equitable and accessible online learning experience for students during the COVID-19 pandemic and into the future.

1. **Create accessible materials:** Ensure that documents can be easily shared and printed; share documents and materials that are compatible with assistive technologies; adopt inclusive writing, respectful and sensitive to students from different backgrounds; provide descriptions in hyperlinks and images for students with visual impairments and using screen readers; format text in easily readable colors and fonts; provide course content materials in multiple formats.

⁵ *"The latest crisis: Low-income students are dropping out of college this fall in alarming numbers,"* Washington Post, September 16, 2020; *"No Home, No Wi-Fi: Pandemic Adds to Strain on Poor College Students,"* New York Times, October 12, 2020.

2. **Choose adequate digital technologies:** Use university and institutional IT department-supported digital technologies; use digital technologies available for students in different time zones and international contexts; choose tools that include accessibility features, such as text-to-speech, high-contrast themes, enlarged cursors, closed-captioning, keyboard shortcuts and alternative text.
3. **Record lectures, and caption videos and audio content:** Ensure the asynchronous availability of lectures; facilitate the accessibility of these lectures or any other video or audio content through captioning.
4. **Adopt inclusive culturally responsive teaching:** Instill equity as a value in designing learning experiences; avoid one-size-fits-all instructional designs; be aware of the risks of a “color blind” approach as claiming not to see race may mean ignoring racism or discrimination; explicitly value all students’ experiences; design courses to activate students’ cultural capital; make sure that all students are seen, heard, respected and valued for who they are.
5. **Adopt a flexible approach to student participation:** Prepare for flexible timing for student assessment; discontinue traditional three-hour lectures; opt for asynchronous activities; give priority to project-based assignments in order to promote asynchronous participation; provide additional time for completing exams and other evaluations when necessary.
6. **Ensure financial support and equipment:** Facilitate students’ access to financial aid and technological equipment, or provide this when possible during the pandemic to students facing financial constraints, no questions asked.
7. **Understand student needs:** Host panels with student organizations, identity-based equity centers, LGBTQ resource centers and multicultural centers, and other student-led groups where student panelists talk about their new reality and what they want faculty to know; administer ongoing surveys to monitor students’ situations; pause and ask students about their needs, their expectations and how things are going with them — because they know best about their own situation.
8. **Address systemic racism:** Staff noted that there is more work to be done to effectively develop resource centers charged with supporting faculty in providing quality learning experiences and providing safe and equitable experiences for ethnically diverse students.

V. Anti-Racism in Higher Education

The article “*Anti-Racism in Higher Education: A Model for Change*,” published in the *Race and Pedagogy Journal*, describes how racism continues to persist in higher education and traditional diversity initiatives that focus only on support resources and tolerance training continue to fall short in making lasting change on college and university campuses. This scholarly paper presents a model for change within higher education that distributes leadership and institutional power across racial lines and enlightens the White community about systemic inequities.

The authors begin by presenting an historical picture of White dominance in higher education and defining how the culture of whiteness has created effective and pervasive white

normativity. They note that diversity initiatives that have failed to educate about the reality and prevalence of White dominance and supremacy on campuses, focusing on merely changing individuals rather than dismantling structural inequalities that perpetuate systemic racism, lead to engaging difficulties from a deficit mindset. This removes blame of academic failure from the education system and places it on the individual and/or subgroup.

Deficit thinking is represented by educators labeling students as at-risk, underprepared and of low socioeconomic status, and White administrators using “a lack of qualified candidates” as a euphemism allowing them to ignore the need for diversity and thus to discriminate in hiring. This continues to have a detrimental effect on a developmental path for leaders of color in higher educational institutions. They go on to analyze how diversity initiatives fail when organizations neglect to examine and change power dynamics and organizational structures that perpetuate discriminatory behaviors and oppressive practices. For instance, Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) are hired to implement diversity strategies that will help to absolve issues surrounding diversity but fail to provide adequate resources, and experience the expectation to become complicit in perpetuating the system of dominance—therefore acting instead as “Chief Absolution Officer.” They also describe and provide data to demonstrate the lack of shared power in higher education.

Despite recent minor improvements, Whites hold the overwhelming majority of leadership and regular faculty positions in higher education institutions nationally. Staff or faculty positions have been the traditional pipeline for senior leadership in higher education, so lack of access to those pipelines perpetuates a lack of progress in diversifying higher education leadership. Increases in ethnic and racial diversity among higher educational leaders are slight, especially when compared to increases in racial and ethnic diversity among students. A new model is needed which disrupts the firm grasp of White hegemony on leadership paths and pipelines.

Moving Forward: A Model for Change

How can this be addressed? In their concluding section: “Moving Forward: A Model for Change”, the authors note how past efforts to address racial inequities in higher education, such as increasing support resources for students of color and increasing cultural awareness, remain important factors for educational leaders to redress, but they are not the primary solutions to problems that exist along racial lines. Without addressing the more fundamental problems of systemic racism within higher education, the support resources will continue to be poured into a broken system that cannot support the very assistance being offered to it. Institutions must find new ways to achieve their stated goals and strategies. They offer suggestions for sharing (and surrendering) power across racial lines and educating the White community about issues of race and justice.

Sharing Power

Increasing the percentage of people of color holding leadership positions is referred to as “sharing power,” a limited term which implies that Whites own the power and should benevolently open the leadership doors to people of color. Instead, Whites must not only share but surrender power. It’s difficult to suggest how People of Color (POCs) can position themselves for leadership roles when they’ve historically been denied access; it is not their

responsibility to fix a system that has historically disadvantaged them. POCs have long gone above and beyond job responsibilities to address issues for students of color, participating in diversity committees or assisting with implementing initiatives, etc.

To create a viable pipeline for educational leaders of color, current leadership must very intentionally create an ecosystem in which emerging leaders' identities are recognized and celebrated. One practical step is to ensure a building block to support a path for educational leaders of color to move into the highest leadership by educating all students, faculty and staff about racism (but again, the onus is on the system, not POCs, to change). This might result in more PhD candidates of color, and therefore an increase in faculty and then higher positions of color across the educational spectrum, which will continue to shift policies along with the power.

Re-Educating White Leaders

White leaders must practice self-examination and cultivate deeper criticality to recognize the systemic nature of oppression and how their whiteness has systematically privileged them, shaped their thinking processes, and both consciously and unconsciously affected their leadership decisions. The authors propose that this kind of learning begins with the Boards of Trustees and presidents of colleges, and moves on to middle managers and beyond. The process of learning the racial history of whiteness, how it's impacted the college's inception, and personal work on conscious and unconscious biases, should be incorporated into annual work responsibilities, and include meetings with outside consultants to provide an assessment of the work needed.

Important parts of this exploration include discovering the moments that ascendancy to a position of power was aided by privilege, coming to terms with racial fragility, and learning to avoid the White savior complex which assumes that strong relationships and reconciliation work alone will solve the problems associated with racism. Although potentially beneficial, this emphasis can also place pressure on People of Color to instruct and encourage Whites on racism, repeating the work again and again since it does little to dismantle systemic racism.

The authors conclude by expressing that higher education continues to be a space where inequity and inequality collide, and where conversations around diversity and Whiteness are challenged daily. As demonstrated by how race-based equity continues to be at the forefront of institutional initiatives, court cases surrounding admissions criteria, and federal financial incentives for Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSI), the racial diversification of college campus remains a critical issue. The work to be done focuses on the need for critical consciousness among those in dominant positions of higher educational institutions and the sharing of power across racial lines for the equity and empowerment of all campus community members. Only intentional, albeit challenging, steps toward power-sharing at the highest levels of higher education and a radical reconceptualization of consciousness and collective action will lead to meaningful change that values, affirms, and empowers historically marginalized people in higher education.

VI. Conclusion

The resources summarized within this memo represent only a fraction of the deep thinking and action that is taking place throughout higher education—and the nation as a whole—regarding how to create greater educational and economic equity. Hopefully it serves as a useful guide as Green River College continues its journey to challenge systemic inequities, shift policies and practices, and provide truly equitable access to a quality educational experience and successful professional careers for all students.

VII. Resources

1. *Laying the groundwork: Concepts and Activities for Racial Equity Work*. Center for Urban Education, Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA, 2020.
2. *Step Up & Lead for Equity: What Higher Education Can Do to Reverse Our Deepening Divides*. Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), Washington, DC, 2016.
3. *Structural Equity: Big-Picture Thinking & Partnerships That Improve Community College Student Outcomes*. The Aspen Institute, College Excellence Program, Aspen, CO, 2016.
4. Naffi, N., Davidson, A., Patino, A., Beatty, B., Gbetoglo, E. & Duponsel, N. (September 30, 2020). *Online learning during COVID-19: 8 ways universities can improve equity and access*. The Conversation (website), <https://theconversation.com/online-learning-during-covid-19-8-ways-universities-can-improve-equity-and-access-145286>
5. Ash, A, Hill, R., Risdon, S.N., & Jun, A. (2020). Anti-Racism in Higher Education: A Model for Change. *Race and Pedagogy Journal*, vol. 4, no. 3.