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## Planning as Strategy for Improving Black and Latinx Student Equity: Lessons from Nine California Community Colleges

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**Abstract:** In 2014, California policymakers passed the Student Equity Plans (SEP) policy to address disparities in the community college system. The reform effort formalized a campus-wide planning effort that required institutions to examine their data for disparities, develop goals and strategies to mitigate identified inequities, and use new fiscal resources to realize their plans. In recent years, there has been an increase in the enactment of state-level higher education policies, but few, if any, have focused on the notion of equity or explicitly named racial and ethnic groups as policy beneficiaries. This study examines nine student equity plans in the state's largest community college district. Drawing upon critical policy analysis, we place a focus on understanding if, and how, the planning process was used to address inequities facing Black and Latinx students. Based on our analysis we found several themes on how plans identified and address barriers facing Black and Latinx

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students. After examining 178 equity activities, we found only 28 promising activities that explicitly targeted Black and Latinx students with culturally relevant, data-driven, evidence-based strategies. These findings have compelling implications for policymakers seeking to develop reform efforts and institutions using policy to address current and historic inequities faced by Black and Latinx students. The use of planning for improvement is commonplace in educational policy, but we find that more training and capacity-building efforts are necessary to use planning as an opportunity to address racial inequity in community college.

**Keywords:** community college; policy analysis; educational equity; race

### **Planificación como estrategia para mejorar la equidad de los estudiantes de Black y Latinx: Lecciones de nueve colegios comunitarios de California**

**Resumen:** En 2014, los legisladores de California aprobaron la política de Planes de Equidad Estudiantil (SEP) para abordar las disparidades en el sistema de instituciones postsecundarias comunitarias. El esfuerzo de reforma formalizó un esfuerzo de planificación en todo el campus que requería que las instituciones examinaran sus datos en busca de disparidades, desarrollaran objetivos y estrategias para mitigar las inequidades identificadas y utilizaran nuevos recursos fiscales para realizar sus planes. En los últimos años, ha habido un aumento en la promulgación de políticas de educación superior a nivel estatal, pero pocas, si las hubiere, se han centrado en la noción de equidad o grupos raciales y étnicos explícitamente nombrados como beneficiarios de las políticas. Este estudio examina nueve planes de equidad estudiantil en el distrito de colegios comunitarios más grande del estado. Basándonos en el análisis de políticas críticas, nos enfocamos en comprender si, y cómo, se utilizó el proceso de planificación para abordar las inequidades que enfrentan los estudiantes de Black y Latinx. Con base en nuestro análisis, encontramos varios temas sobre cómo se identificaron los planes y las barreras que enfrentan los estudiantes de Black y Latinx. Después de examinar 178 actividades de equidad, encontramos solo 28 actividades prometedoras que apuntaban explícitamente a estudiantes de Black y Latinx con estrategias culturalmente relevantes, basadas en evidencia y basadas en evidencia. Estos hallazgos tienen implicaciones convincentes para los formuladores de políticas que buscan desarrollar esfuerzos de reforma e instituciones que usan políticas para abordar las inequidades actuales e históricas que enfrentan los estudiantes de Black y Latinx. El uso de la planificación para la mejora es un lugar común en la política educativa, pero encontramos que se necesitan más esfuerzos de formación y fortalecimiento de la capacidad para usar la planificación como una oportunidad para abordar la inequidad racial en el colegio comunitario.

**Palabras clave:** colegio comunitario; análisis de políticas; equidad educativa; raza

### **Planejamento como estratégia para melhorar a equidade de estudantes negros e latinos: Lições de nove colégios da comunidades da Califórnia**

**Resumo:** Em 2014, os legisladores da Califórnia aprovaram a política dos Planos de Equidade Estudiantil (SEP) para lidar com as disparidades no sistema de instituições pós-secundárias da comunidade. O esforço de reforma formalizou um esforço de planejamento em todo o campus que exigia que as instituições examinassem seus dados em busca de disparidades, desenvolvessem objetivos e estratégias para mitigar desigualdades identificadas e usassem novos recursos fiscais para executar seus planos. Nos últimos anos, tem havido um aumento na adoção de políticas de ensino superior em todo o estado, mas

poucos, se houver, têm-se centrado na noção de equidade ou de grupos raciais e étnicos explicitamente nomeado como beneficiários das políticas. Este estudo examina nove planos de equidade estudantil no maior distrito de faculdades comunitárias do estado. Com base na análise de políticas críticas, nos concentramos em compreender se, e como, o processo de planejamento foi usado para abordar as iniquidades enfrentadas pelos estudantes de Black e Latinx. Com base em nossa análise, encontramos vários tópicos sobre como os planos e barreiras enfrentados pelos alunos de Black e Latinx foram identificados. Depois de examinar 178 atividades de equidade, encontramos apenas 28 atividades promissoras que segmentavam explicitamente alunos negros e latinos com estratégias culturalmente relevantes, baseadas em evidências e baseadas em evidências. Essas descobertas têm implicações convincentes para os formuladores de políticas que buscam desenvolver esforços de reforma e instituições que usam políticas para lidar com as desigualdades atuais e históricas enfrentadas pelos estudantes negros e latinos. O uso de planejamento para melhoria é um lugar comum na política educacional, mas achamos que mais esforços de treinamento e capacitação são necessários para usar o planejamento como uma oportunidade para abordar a desigualdade racial no colégio da comunidade.

**Palavras-chave:** colégio da comunidade; análise de políticas; equidade educacional; raça

### **Planning as Strategy for Improving Black and Latinx Student Equity: Lessons from Nine Community Colleges**

Planning is a longstanding feature of higher education, with tools such as strategic plans and master plans commonly used to develop a common institutional vision, adapt to environmental changes, and make necessary improvements. Increasingly, policymakers and institutional leaders are turning to planning initiatives to address endemic issues plaguing higher education such as persistent racial equity gaps in attainment. In community colleges, efforts to address inequities are particularly needed given their unique and necessary mission within U.S. higher education. As open-access institutions, they serve as centers of educational promise available to any individual seeking postsecondary educational opportunities through general education courses, workforce development and short-term training, or transfer preparation (Dowd, 2007). Due to their open admissions policies, they enroll a larger proportion of low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized<sup>1</sup> students. Community colleges thus serve a disproportionate number of students who have faced constant disadvantage and inequality throughout their educational trajectory (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Malcom, 2013; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015).

Despite the relatively diverse student demographics served and broad curricula offered, community colleges receive significantly less money per student than four-year public and private institutions (Dowd & Shieh, 2013; U. S. Department of Education, 2016). Nationally, in 2014-2015, public two-year institutions received an average of \$4,755 per student, compared to the \$9,630 public four-year universities received per student (US Department of Education, 2016). The Century Foundation (2015) found that public and private research universities spent three and five times, respectively, more per student than community colleges. These differences point to funding disparities across higher education systems and fiscal constraints limiting the resources available to help students navigate community college and progress towards degree attainment or transfer

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<sup>1</sup> The term “minoritized” is used instead of “minority” or “students of color” throughout this paper to signify that persons are not born into a minority status, but are subordinated and rendered into minority positions by U.S. social institutions (See Gillborn, 2005; Harper, 2012).

(Belfield, Crosta, & Jenkins, 2014). Perhaps unsurprisingly then are the limited success rates in degree attainment and transfer to four-year institutions produced by community colleges (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Goldrick-Rab, 2010; Melguizo, Keinzl, & Alfonso, 2011). Regarding degree completion, community colleges have the lowest completion rates of all postsecondary institutions only 38% of students who begin their education at a community college complete an associate's degree after six years (Gonzales, 2015). These rates are even lower for transfer and baccalaureate attainment, with less than 25% of students successfully transferring out and less than 17% earning a bachelor's degree after six years (Jenkins & Fink, 2015). These measures of transfer and degree attainment are even lower when disaggregated by race and ethnicity.

These troubling national trends are also reflected in California's Community College System—the largest community college system in the nation—that serves 2.3 million students across 114 individual campuses. Despite greater participation in the state's higher education system over the last 30 years, attendance for racially minoritized students has been stratified by institutional type and sector in the state (Posselt, Jaquette, & Bastedo, 2012). In 2014-2015, more than 70% of all Latinx<sup>2</sup> and 68% of all Black first-time students in the state enrolled in community college (California Community College Chancellor's Office Datamart, 2017; Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015a). In particular, the Latinx enrollment rate in this sector has increased from 19% of all community college students in 1992 to 43% in 2015. Given these enrollment patterns and the differences in state support between the three higher education systems in the state, researchers have argued that these trends demonstrate a “de facto segregated system of higher education” of racially segregated pathways that produce disparities in persistence, transfer, and completion rates for students attending community colleges (Gonzalez, 2015, p. 72).

Our paper examines how institutions developed equity plans through critical and discursive approaches. As we move forward in this article, importance is placed on language, particularly how students are described in our work, whether students are “blamed” for the inequities or institutions take responsibility for the outcome experienced on their campus (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012). A focus is placed on the examining language used within these documents that describe inequity, the causes they attribute to these gaps of it, as well as potential remedies to improve equity in community college. Throughout this paper, we use of the terms “racially minoritized” and “Latinx” purposefully to acknowledge the social constructions of race and gender. Specifically, the term “racially minoritized” indicates that people are not born “a minority status nor are they minoritized in every social context” rather minority status is rendered in particular contexts overrepresented by whiteness (Harper, 2012, p. 9). “Latinx,” on the other hand, is used to be inclusive of trans and gender non-conforming people typically excluded from academic, policy, and public discourse through the use of gender-binary terms.

### **Purpose of the Study**

California state policymakers have enacted several higher education policies in recent years to counter persistent educational inequities. These state-led initiatives include basic skills reform to address developmental education, revised funding formulas to provide additional fiscal resources, and mandated formal planning as a strategy to address student inequities. These state policies are critical attempts to address, restructure, and improve the conditions and outcomes experienced by community college students. Given the increased participation of racially minoritized students and

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<sup>2</sup> Latinx is used as a term to replace “Latina/o” recognizing the fluidity of gender identity and students that are trans\* and gender non-conforming. The term “Hispanic” is not used interchangeably, but only as a descriptor of formal categories such as “Hispanic-Serving Institution.”

persistent racial inequities, the state-mandated formal planning through campus equity plans is critical action levers to improve community college attainment.

To understand how equity-focused formal planning can serve as an opportunity to address longstanding inequities in community college, this paper focuses specifically on the Student Equity Plans (SEP) policy passed by the California legislature in 2014. The policy formalized equity planning at the institutional-level to address educational inequities facing community colleges across the state. In recent years, there has been an increase in the enactment of state-level higher education policies, but few, if any, have focused on the notion of equity or have explicitly named racial and ethnic groups as policy beneficiaries. The inability of prior reform efforts to focus on racial/ethnic groups or target racial disparities may fail to appropriately acknowledge or address consistent gaps among minoritized student groups such as Black and Latinx students (Winkle-Wagner, Sule, & Maramba, 2014). To be sure, various state-level policies have focused on improving college completion or closing achievement gaps (Perna & Finney, 2014), but most have concentrated on aggregate student improvement rather than targeting specific subgroup populations (i.e., racial/ethnic groups, foster youth, veterans).

In contrast to race- and equity-neutral policies, California passed and funded the Student Equity Policy, which requires all community colleges to assess equity in student success by race and ethnicity and other demographic student groups. This then provides the opportunity for institutions to be race-conscious in their formal planning and development of specific strategies to support the student groups identified as facing the largest equity gaps on their campus (Bensimon, 2016; Felix, Trinidad, Ching, & Bensimon, 2018). From 2014 to 2017, the state has provided over \$530 million dollars for the implementation of the equity plans in community college. The policy, as state-mandated action, requires formal planning as a process to identify and address inequities. California's SEP utilizes a bottom-up approach that allows colleges to determine gaps, set goals, and develop activities specific to their campus (Ching, Felix, Fernandez Castro, & Trinidad, forthcoming). However, little is known about the details of the plans, such as what student groups are most disproportionately impacted, the interventions colleges develop to address identified equity gaps, and how exactly the money is allocated to achieve these goals. This study conducts an analysis of the equity plans submitted to the state to understand which groups were targeted, the activities and strategies proposed to address inequities, and how new funds were allocated to implement the policy.

Our analysis highlights the ways Black and Latinx students potentially benefit from community colleges' planning as a strategy to address current and longstanding educational inequities on campus. We focus on Black and Latinx students as they are the two student groups with the largest equity gaps across the state in basic skills progression (i.e. developmental education), persistence, and transfer success. Although over two-thirds of all first-time Black and Latinx undergraduates in California are enrolled in community colleges (Campaign for College Opportunity, 2015a, 2015b), the most recent data available for California Community College outcomes finds that Black and Latinx students have the highest placement rates in developmental math and English and some of the lowest success rates progressing to transfer-level courses (Acevedo-Gil, Santos, Alonso, & Solórzano, 2015). Within developmental education, Black students have the lowest success rates in the progression from developmental English and math to a college-level course, while Latinx students face the greatest challenges in moving from basic skills ESL courses to college-level English. Even when Black and Latinx students persist through developmental education, they continue to face challenges with degree attainment and transfer. For example, transfer rates for Black and Latinx students were 34.3% and 29.2% after six years, respectively, compared to an average transfer rate of 37.9% (CCCCO Datamart, 2017). Black and

Latinx students' overrepresentation and persistent inequities in community colleges suggest they would be identified as beneficiaries in student equity plans.

To date, there is very little research examining how the policy's equity-focused planning and funds have been used to address equity gaps faced by Black and Latinx students specifically, and students of color more generally, whom tend to experience the greatest disparities (Melguizo, Witham, & Fong, 2015). Therefore, the goal of this study is to provide insight into the implementation of the SEP through analysis of student equity plans submitted to the state Chancellor's Office. Given this focus, the guiding questions for this study were:

- (1) In what ways were community college equity plans used as an opportunity to address educational inequities facing Black and Latinx students?
- (2) In what educational areas were Black and Latinx students identified as experiencing disproportionate impact?
  - a. In what ways were Black and Latinx students explicitly addressed in the goals and activities articulated?
  - b. How did institutions allocate their equity funds to address Black and Latinx student inequities?

These research questions enable us to explore how community colleges, as well as state policymakers, used formal planning as a policy tool to improve educational inequities among Black and Latinx students. As artifacts produced from the equity planning mandated by the SEP, the student equity plans submitted by each community college provide evidence of how campuses identified student groups experiencing equity gaps, articulated potential solutions, and allocated new funding to achieve equity goals. In this paper, we first review the literature on planning in education and details of the Student Equity Plans policy. We then outline the conceptual framework guiding the study. This framework draws from Critical Policy Analysis to examine how equity plans specifically target, address, and fund strategies to mitigate racial inequities (Iverson, 2007; Young & Diem, 2017). In the following section, we outline our methods including the data sources and analytic procedures used. Lastly, we describe our findings and conclude with recommendations for state policymakers and practitioners, implications for the field of higher education policy, and possible directions for further research.

## **Planning as Strategy for Equity in Higher Education**

As institutions work to fulfill their educational missions to students, they are also constantly responding to fluctuation in government policies, funding sources, technologies, student demographics, and social dynamics, while maneuvering complex (and often conflicting) interests within higher education organizations (Driscoll, 2010). Many institutions have adopted strategic planning from the private business sector to respond to accountability demands and create needed changes (e.g. Driscoll, 2010; Goho & Webb, 2003; Morphey, 2000). However, higher education's unique characteristics (e.g. various and diverse missions, ambiguous goals, public accountability, loosely coupled structures, and shared governance) have rendered traditional strategic planning approaches much less effective in educational settings than in the business sector (Chance & Williams, 2009). As higher education institutions serve more diverse student populations, colleges have used strategic planning to address the changing needs of their students. However, critical approaches have been noticeably absent from the strategic planning process. A critical lens is needed in the planning process to reveal and address the disparate impact of color-blind and seemingly objective policies and practices on racially minoritized students. This review of the literature on

formal planning in education demonstrates the mixed results of strategic planning as a tool for improving educational outcomes, as well as the need for critical approaches to examine educational plans and policies.

### **Research on Strategic Planning in Higher Education**

In higher education, strategic planning began to be adopted in the early 1980s and was mainstreamed by the late 1990s in response to calls for accountability and other environmental changes (Driscoll, 2010; Marcus, 1999). Strategic planning in higher education similarly borrowed planning strategies from the private business sector, including environmental scanning, long range planning, rational models of planning, and organizational development models, among many others (Driscoll, 2010; Goho & Webb, 2003). The process of strategic planning sought to provide higher education institutions with ongoing strategies to create congruence between the institution and its external environment while also considering the institution's educational mission (Driscoll, 2010). The goal of the strategic planning process is for school personnel to carefully consider reforms and strategies needed to improve student achievement and other educational outcomes, and to formally articulate their strategies for change and assessment in a comprehensive school plan (Strunk, Marsh, Bush-Mecenas, & Duque, 2016). By engaging in the process of strategic planning, institutions aimed to be more aware and responsive to environmental changes and develop a path towards a collective vision for the institution (Chance & Williams, 2009). The strategic planning methods utilized by higher education institutions were rational, linear, and business-type models. Unfortunately, these models depended too heavily on high levels of predictability and objectivity in their practitioners' analyses and decision-making but overlooked the unique characteristics of higher education organizations (Chance & Williams, 2009; Driscoll, 2010; Marcus, 1999).

Unlike research on formal planning in non-educational settings that generally affirms the role of strategic planning in improved organizational performance (Strunk et al., 2016), much of the research on strategic planning in higher education has found less positive findings (Chance & Williams, 2009; Morphew, 2000; Rowley, Lujan, & Dolence, 1997). Existing research such as Rowley and associates' (1997, 1998) reviews of strategic planning in higher education environments, for example, warn that while strategic planning has had documented success in business organizations, "when institutions of higher education try to adopt typical business strategies in strategic planning, most fail" (Chance & Williams, 2009, p. 41). However, more research is needed exploring strategic planning in higher education. Existing research on traditional strategic planning overlooks the many differences between business and educational organizations such as public accountability, varied funding sources, multiple missions, loosely coupled structures, shared governance, unclear goals, and many others (Driscoll, 2010). Furthermore, few studies have focused on assessing the products and results of strategic planning, the implementation of plans, or the impact of strategic plans on different student groups (Chance & Williams, 2009).

Given higher education's decentralized and often competing structures, any effort to create and implement new strategic planning involves "the complex process by which various individuals and groups seek to exert their power or influence over one another to achieve their interests" (Lindblom, 1968; as cited in Marcus, 1999, p. 45). Strategic planning tends to be assumed as an objective process that produces rational solutions, but research has demonstrated how seemingly objective, apolitical, and well-intentioned policies and policy tools, such as strategic planning, are riddled with subjectivity and political influences that can have disparate impacts on different student groups (Chase, Dowd, Pazich, & Bensimon, 2014; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015; Marcus, 1999). For example, Chase and associates (2014) examined transfer policies in seven states and found that because transfer policies are largely color blind and uncritical, they perpetuate existing racial

inequities. Similarly, the assumption of objectivity in strategic planning can overlook how planning decisions may maintain educational equity gaps.

### **An Equity Planning Approach in California's Community Colleges**

California's Student Equity Policy (SEP) policy combined strategic planning approaches with incentives and tools for colleges to conduct assessments that documented the extent of inequity in student success (Felix et al., 2018). The idea of creating a student equity plan was formally adopted by the Board of Governors (BOG) of the California Community Colleges system in 1993, following a decade of declining enrollments of students of color and low-income students (Guichard, 1992). The BOG called for immediate and sustained action to achieve comprehensive educational equity, which led to the passage of California Assembly Bill 617 in 1991 acknowledging the need for California public colleges and universities to adapt and prepare students for a "multicultural society" (Guichard, 2000, p. 4).

Created during a period of affirmative action which encouraged policymakers to draft legislation that addressed historic and current forms of discrimination for different racial and ethnic groups (Gurin, Lehman, & Lewis, 2004), equity planning prompted colleges to identify gaps within their institution and create plans articulating how the college would address the inequities disproportionately impacting specific student groups. Underpinning the policy was a concern about the educational gaps facing "minorities" and the role of community colleges to address them:

It matters to our future and to our students... California will not be a pleasant place to live for any of us if a permanent underclass largely composed of those from *ethnic minorities* has little stake in society and little hope for the future... If community colleges work successfully in the effort to increase rates of student success, the State just might have a better future. If we fail, it is hard to imagine who else can make up for our failure. (authors' emphasis, Guichard, 1992, p. 8)

Although, the planning process was well-intentioned and could be seen as a way to promote more equitable outcomes in community college, two aspects limited the development of equity plans across the state for nearly 20 years. First, the equity planning process was seen a "zero-cost mandate" meaning that the state policymakers and the chancellor's office expected institutions to develop this reform effort within normal job responsibilities and without additional resources (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges, 1993). Missing fiscal resources as an incentivizing tool from the legislature relegated the equity planning policy largely ineffective and under-implemented in community college (Legislative Analyst Office, 2016). The second aspect was the passage of Proposition 209 in 1996, restricting public institutions from targeting students of color and using race-conscious initiatives (Guichard, 2000). Thus, when the SEP was updated in 1996, colleges were instructed to consider equity for "all students," including specifically white and male students (Yokotobi, 2003).

In 2014, the state reformulated the Student Equity Policy and passed the Senate Bill 860 which was the first time funding was allocated to the reform effort. In addition, the planning guidelines were updated moving the focus from students of color, women, and those with disabilities to over 14 different target groups (Noldon, 2015). Since 2014, individual community colleges have received equity funding to develop their plans and carry out the practices proposed in them. Over the last four fiscal years, the state has allocated \$535 million to community colleges<sup>3</sup>. Each college receives funding ranging between \$250,000 and \$3.3 million, which is calculated based

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<sup>3</sup> \$70 million dollars were allocated to the policy in 2014-2015. The following year, 2015-2016, it increased to \$155 million dollars. For, 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 the amount allocated has stayed at \$155 million dollars.



on a six-factor formula, including enrollment size, the number of Pell-grant recipients, and household income of the service area. The current SEP mandates all community colleges in the state to create plans that address inequities in five indicators of educational opportunity and achievement: Access, Course Completion, Basic Skills, Degree Completion, and Transfer. This equity audit is detailed in a template created and then submitted to the Chancellor's Office for review. There are three key areas underlying the equity planning process (California Education Code, Title 5, §54220):

1. Institutions needed to **calculate the disproportionate impact** on educational outcomes for student groups based on six demographic characteristics of vulnerability, including race/ethnicity, gender, veteran status, foster youth, socioeconomic status, and ability status. Once these calculations were conducted, colleges would identify specific student groups to target.
2. After identifying target groups, institutions **developed and proposed goals and strategies to address** disproportionate impact in specific educational areas.
3. Institutions then needed to decide how to **allocate specialized equity funds to implement the strategies and activities proposed**. Within a student equity plan, institutions had to document "the resources budgeted for the initiatives that the community college will undertake."

Although the policy requires colleges to create an equity plan to receive SEP funds, colleges are given autonomy to decide how to use the funds based on the unique inequities in the context of their campus. Nonetheless, the SEP is susceptible to the subjective and contextual nature of policy design and formal planning: college personnel make sense of the policy, develop plans based on their understanding, and implement strategies according to which knowledge is accessible and which politics can be navigated. The SEP's potential success to improve racial equity through equity planning is reliant on those who interpret and implement the policy (Chase, 2016; Datnow & Park, 2009). Datnow & Park (2009) research on educational reforms indicates that policy perspectives underlying all policy design and implementation. The researchers introduce four perspectives: technical-rational, mutual adaptation, sense-making, and co-construction. Because of its adoption from the business sector, strategic planning has employed a techno-rational perspective with its reliance on predictability and top-down orientation (Hill & Varone, 2016; Sabatier, 1986). The SEP, on the other hand, employs perspectives more similar to mutual adaptation and sense-making, through its bottom up approach and by incorporating local-level implementers, or street-level bureaucrats, in the policy implementation processes. However, equity-minded planning seeks to improve equity gaps stemming from historical and broad social issues of power and discrimination that are embedded in institutional policies and practices. Thus, it is more appropriate for the SEP to also incorporate policy design elements that pay attention to political, cultural, and contextual differences that acknowledge the role of power throughout the policy design and implementation process (Datnow & Park, 2009). While the SEP heavily involves college practitioners in the implementation process through equity planning, the policy fails to acknowledge how external social and political dynamics influence higher education institutions, policy designers, implementers, and impacted student groups.

Traditional policy research, however, also tends to assume objectivity and is uncritical of the value-laden and political nature of policy creation, the complexity of implementation, or the social construction of policy problems (Alemán, 2007; Honig, 2006; Iverson, 2007). The lack of critical research in educational policy studies has resulted in little research examining how seemingly "neutral" educational policies reinforce inequities, whether through the planning process,

practitioner sense-making of policies, the implementation of strategic plans, or the effects on different student groups outcomes (Chase, 2016; Chase, Dowd, Pazich, & Bensimon, 2014; Iverson, 2007). A critical lens to policy analysis is needed to examine how equity planning differs from strategic planning particularly in addressing the equity gaps experienced by historically disadvantaged student groups. This study uses critical policy analysis to 1) analyze the artifacts of implementation, 2) understand how plans express notions of equity, and 3) gauge how plans target Black and Latinx students – two historically disadvantaged student groups who are currently experiencing large equity gaps in the California’s Community Colleges. The SEP’s focus on equity planning in community colleges offers an example of how theoretical policy levers can be used to be more critical of historical and social inequities.

## Theoretical Framework

Policy research has long been influenced by rational-scientific theories focused on observing the policy process in a linear fashion, from formulation, to implementation, to outcomes (Heck, 2004). These approaches to studying policy have focused on elements such as compliance, fidelity, impact, and outcomes (Sabatier & Weible, 2014). Scholars using more critical theories, such as Critical Policy Analysis (CPA), have critiqued the inability of educational research using rational theories to comprehensively understand policy problems in schools given an overreliance on objectivity, rationality, and ahistoricism (Anderson, 2012; Iverson, 2007; Parker & Villalpando, 2007). In contrast to rational theories, critical theories attempt to explore the silence in policy narratives, highlight social context, and acknowledge the role of structural racism in how policy is crafted and implemented in schools (Martínez-Alemán, Pusser, & Bensimon, 2015). By employing theoretical elements from critical policy analysis, researchers have found that well-intended educational policies addressing equity in areas such as school finance (Alemán, 2007), college admissions (Martinez-Alemán, 2015), and transfer (Chase et al., 2014) can have “racially curious effects” that adversely impact racially minoritized students, such as Latinx and Black students (Dumas & Anyon, 2006, p. 153).

Our study is guided by critical policy analysis (CPA) approach and complemented by the concepts of equity-mindedness (Bensimon, 2007; Bensimon & Malcom, 2012) and cultural-relevancy (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Rendon, 2002). CPA foregrounds dimensions such as race or gender in the analysis of policy and attempts to uncover issues of power, social reproduction, racism, or sexism. Taking a CPA approach allows us to foreground race in studying the implementation of the SEP and to consider how the policy may differentially impact Black and Latinx students. For example, Iverson (2007) used CPA to examine university diversity policies and how they frame students of color. She found campus diversity policies, even though well intended, were detrimental to students of color when framed within deficit-based beliefs. Alemán (2007) adds that a critical lens can situate policies in their political and social context and uncover ways that ahistorical and race-neutral policies fail students of color. Given our theoretical interests, we seek to understand the ways student equity plans have been developed across the state with a focus on serving Black and Latinx students. This means we focused on *if* these student groups were identified in the equity plans, *how* their inequities were addressed through goals and activities, and the *ways* equity funds were used to support those strategies.

Building on critical approaches in education and sociology, Bensimon (2007) has developed the concept of “equity-mindedness” which looks at the role of institutions and practitioners (i.e., faculty, staff, administrators) in implementing policies that are intended to improve educational conditions and outcomes for racially minoritized students. Equity-mindedness places the onus on

practitioners to remediate practice to improve equity gaps. It also illuminates the hidden assumptions at play when moving from policy to practice, such as including language that limits the use of race in plan activities. The use of equity-mindedness allows us to understand if and how the student equity plans were developed in ways that were race-conscious, aware of systemic inequities, focused on remediating practice, and advancing equity. In addition, cultural-relevancy is used to explore if and how these equity plans developed activities that are intentional, strategic, and asset-based for students they target (Paris, 2012; Rendon, 2002). Culturally relevant practices tend to counter societal discourse of the “at-risk student” by emphasizing assets, not the deficits, possessed by the students in targeted groups (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The focus is on the development of practices (i.e., student equity activities) that center the strengths of the communities and students marginalized by systemic inequities in society (Paris, 2012). The combination of Critical Policy Analysis, equity-mindedness, and cultural-relevancy assist us in understanding the race-consciousness of these plans and how their proposed activities are structured to improve Black and Latinx student equity in community college.

## Methods

We draw our data from publicly available documents including formal policy documents, implementation memos and training guidelines, and particularly, the individual student equity plans. Our primary data sources were the actual student equity plans. Valid and reliable data for this study was a priority, especially when examining public institutions and reporting our findings. To ensure all equity plans analyzed were in their final version, a formal request was made to California’s Community College Chancellor’s Office for all 2015-2016 student equity plans. The state provided all equity plans submitted as well as other documents such as internal memos and guidelines used to evaluate plans. Possessing formally submitted equity plans increases the validity of the data collected as they are stable, precise, and obtained in an unobtrusive manner (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2014). The data collected was the most accurate and up-to-date versions and allowed for an assessment of how Black and Latinx students were (or were not) addressed in student equity plans.

As data sources, student equity plans are more than just documents; they are artifacts of implementation that allow us to look into each campuses’ development of the policy. The plans are infused with meanings and values that practitioners hold about equity and how to address student inequity (Iverson, 2007; Young & Diem, 2017). Specifically, the language and text employed in the plans communicate ways of thinking that must be examined with a critical eye in order to elicit these values (Bacchi, 1999; Taylor, 1997). We looked into each institutions’ equity plan to understand what they perceive to be inequities, ways to respond to those inequities, how they decided to spend their newly allocated funds, and whether these aspects of the plans addressed racial equity for Black and Latinx students. Additionally, what the plans leave out—i.e., the equity gaps in which they are silent—must also be kept in focus and problematized as they too represent choices of what is and is not valued (Mansfield & Thachik, 2016; Martinez-Alemán et al., 2015). Next, we detail the specific steps and procedures taken to analyze our data and develop our findings.

### Sampling Strategy

This study draws from a subset of student equity plans within the Los Angeles Community College District (LACCD). The LACCD is the largest district in California with nine<sup>4</sup> of the 113 community colleges in the state. As a large, urban district, LACCD presents a particularly useful context to study the equity plans because of its size, student demographics, and equity funding

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix A for the list of colleges and demographic characteristics.

allocations. In 2015-2016, the district enrolled over 230,000 students – about one in ten students in the state – across its nine campuses (CCCCO Datamart, 2017). The district also serves a substantially larger share of Black and Latinx students than the system as a whole. We purposely selected the nine LACCD colleges as an opportunity to study equity plans where there was a higher concentration of Black and Latinx students with the assumption that there would be a larger emphasis on supporting these specific groups through the planning process.

Across the state, Black and Latinx students account for 49% of the 2.3 million students, while the district's share is 68% of 230,000 students (See Figure 1). Although the nine LACCD campuses comprise less than 8% of all community colleges in the state, they enroll 10% of all students, 13.5% of Latinx students, and 16.5% of Black students. The characteristics provide the opportunity to explore equity plans for institutions with concentrated enrollments of Black and Latinx students. As one of the largest and most diverse districts, LACCD has also been awarded significant resources in developing their student equity plans. Of the \$155 million available in the 2015-2016 fiscal year, the district received \$17.5 million – 13% of equity funds allocated by the state. Each campus received between \$1.3 million and \$3.2 million dollars to create activities and strategies to mitigate educational inequities in their student equity plans.

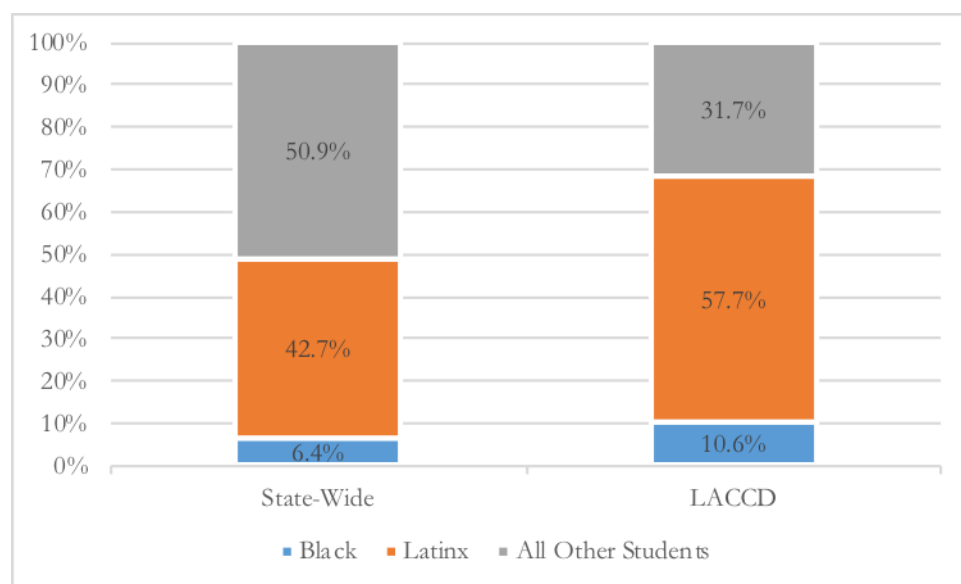


Figure 1. Enrollment Share of Black and Latinx Students in California and LACCD

Choosing to examine only LACCD student equity has its strengths and limitations. The rationale for the sampling strategy is three-fold. First, the nine community colleges in the district have been found to have a serious problem with disparities in outcomes across racial groups, primarily Latino and Black students (Moore & Shulock, 2010). LACCD falls well below state averages in persistence and transfer rates as well as certificate and degree completion for racial-ethnic groups (CCCCO Datamart, 2017). Focusing on these colleges can illuminate if and how these colleges took advantage of state-mandated equity planning to address their clear and persistent racial disparities. Second, the policy provided new fiscal resources to comply with planning mandates. These nine colleges received substantial levels of “equity funding” to develop new practices or scale up existing ones to address inequities discovered through the planning process. An assumption is made that with a higher level of incentives, each college may have developed more robust student equity plans (Mattheis, 2016). Lastly, studying LACCD helps to understand challenges faced by

urban districts and colleges serving the most diverse populations. Community colleges in urban settings face additional barriers to supporting students such as higher rates of poverty, issues of college-preparedness, and unequal distribution of economic resources (Wood & Newman, 2017). Highlighting these colleges may provide insights into ways to reform practices or services to better serve Black and Latinx students in community college. Narrowing the scope of the analysis also results in some limitations, such as leaving out a majority of equity plans, missing relevant content from other institution types (e.g., rural), and decreases our ability to generalize across the state.

### **Analytical Strategy**

Our data analysis proceeded in four stages. First, we developed an assessment framework to evaluate the student equity plans based on previous studies (Felix et al., 2018; Fernandez, 2011; Strunk et al., 2016). The use of an assessment framework was helpful in reducing lengthy educational plans into manageable data, allowed for standard evaluation, and provided a guide to code and categorize data based on different variables. The tool consisted of two sections. The first section pulled data elements directly from the equity plans themselves such as the groups identified as facing disproportionate impact, the articulated goal for the success indicator, and the description of the proposed activity. The second section of the framework allowed us to interpret and evaluate each equity plan for its potential to explicitly target and or address Black and Latinx student inequities. We then used our assessment tool on an equity plan not included in our sample to test and evaluate the framework's ability to capture appropriate data and help answer our research questions. We used an inter-rating meeting based on this test case to revise the framework and standardize our analysis process moving forward. During this process, we rated our assessment of the sample plan, discussed discrepancies in our ratings, revised framework categories, and adopted a standard for evaluation moving forward.

In the second stage, we reviewed the nine plans from the LACCD using the refined assessment framework. Individually, we evaluated each plan, coded based on our framework, and wrote research memos for every three plans reviewed to capture analytical insight and areas to follow-up. We then met as a team to discuss emerging insights and themes and potential discrepant data in our analysis. After reviewing each plan and our coding results, we compiled our data, collapsed similar codes, and synthesized our analysis results to report out our findings. In the third stage of analysis, we examined the aggregated data from all plans and conducted focused-coding for Black and Latinx representation. To answer research questions two and three, we recoded our data in Nvivo11 to understand where Black and Latinx students were identified, mentioned, and targeted. We asked questions such as “are Latinx student equity issues in specific areas of the plan (i.e., basic skills or transfer)” and “what do interventions and activities targeting Black students look like?” Throughout the analysis process, we developed tables and matrices comparing data elements across plans and kept research memos of emerging findings.

Our fourth stage helped to tease out the subtle differences between the equity activities proposed in the plans we examined. We used the Center for Urban Education's (2017) “Equity Effort Assessment” which categorizes proposed activities into five equity asset types: structures, programs, personnel, practices, and policies (See Table 1). Equity activities are categorized into one of the five areas based on the type of solution proposed, intervention targets, resources allocated, and level of institutionalization. This process allowed us to both count activities across the sample as well as categorize them into specific effort types.

Table 1  
Center for Urban Education’s Equity Effort Assessment

Asset Type	Description	Examples	Resource Level
Structures	Creating a new or reintegrating how units, offices, roles on campus work towards improving student success and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Curriculum redesign</li> <li>Integrating academic support and student services efforts</li> </ul>	High
Programs	Specific activity proposed to address student equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>First-Year Experience</li> <li>Transfer Academy</li> </ul>	High
Personnel	Hiring new staff to coordinate proposed equity activity as well as providing professional development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hiring research analysts to evaluate equity efforts</li> <li>New staffing to run proposed program</li> </ul>	High
Practices	Habitual, customary and skillful use of the necessary tools and techniques for instruction, counseling, advising, assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disaggregating success measures by race/ethnicity</li> <li>Revising faculty hiring practices</li> </ul>	Low
Policies	Developing new or revising existing guidelines and rules that govern the operation of the institution.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Course placement policy</li> <li>Priority registration criteria</li> </ul>	Low

The use of equity asset types helps to develop a more nuanced understand of how the proposed activity attempts to improve outcomes on campus by potentially hiring more *personnel* (i.e., adding an institutional researcher to evaluate new programs), revising *policies* that create barriers to equity (i.e., after examining placement data a campus changes assessment policy), or investing in a new *program* (i.e., Latino-focused transfer academy). Both counting activities and categorizing them help us capture the range and magnitude of the efforts proposed in these student equity plans. In addition to what has been described above, we also conducted a matrix analysis (Strunk et al., 2016) to compare across cases to display the areas in which inequities were identified for Black and Latinx students. This helped us to map out the inequities identified across plans (see Table 2), provide summary characteristics, and support the findings discussed in the subsequent section.

Table 2  
Mapping the Identified Equity Gaps for Black and Latinx Students

Indicator Area	Campus 1	Campus 2	Campus 3	Campus 4	Campus 5	Campus 6	Campus 7	Campus 8	Campus 9
Access						LATINX	LATINX	BLACK	
Course Completion	BLACK	LATINX	BOTH		BLACK	LATINX		BLACK	
Basic Skills	LATINX		BOTH	BOTH	LATINX	LATINX	BLACK	BLACK	BLACK
Degree Completion			BLACK	BLACK		LATINX		BLACK	
Transfer	LATINX	BOTH	LATINX			LATINX		LATINX	
Campus Wide		LATINX	BLACK		BLACK			BLACK	

## **Limitations**

As researchers we have taken various steps to ensure our methodology, collection strategy, analysis, and interpretations are credible, accurate, and trustworthy. Completing our analysis, we highlight a few limitations. First is the sample size; we selected the Los Angeles Community College District for its unique characteristics, described earlier, but also recognize this represents only nine of the 114 community colleges in the state. Findings need to be interpreted in the context of the study. Second, our work is bound to the student equity plans collected and analyzed, but have used institutional data and IPEDS information to provide better context related to the variation we described in our findings. Third, we acknowledge our limited ability to compare the impact of dollars allocated between activities and asset types (CCCCO, 2015). With these limits addressed we move forward with sharing our results of analysis and implications for policy and practice.

## **Findings**

Our focus was on understanding how these equity plans were written in ways that addressed inequities for Black and Latinx students, two student groups facing disproportionate impact in various areas of student success at the community college level. The goal of this study was to provide insight into how the nine colleges of the Los Angeles Community College District developed state-mandated student equity plans. In what follows, we detail three relevant findings that emerged from our analysis. The first finding reports the results of our analysis: 1) what student groups the equity plans in the sample targeted, 2) the activities developed to address identified equity gaps, and 3) the funding allocated to support those strategies. Within each of these three results, we focused on whether Black or Latinx students were included. The second theme describes a pattern that emerged when coding our data: the quality of proposed activities varies based on the number of students targeted. The final theme addresses the variation in the planning process in terms of how and what activities were proposed by exploring contextual aspects of each institution as well as the type of support received to develop appropriate activities to address gaps for specific student groups in strategic and relevant ways.

## **Addressing Black and Latinx Student Equity**

The nine student equity plans reviewed in this study proposed a total of 178 activities to address campus inequities with \$12.9 million in funds reported to support these activities across the Los Angeles Community College District (See Table 3). Campuses in the sample proposed between eight and twenty-nine activities to address student gaps identified in their student equity plans. The average number of activities proposed in equity plans across the district was twenty. Of the total 178 activities proposed, improving access (20%), basic skills progression (19%), and course completion rates (17%) had the highest concentration of equity efforts. Each college allocated different amount towards the activities proposed in their equity plans to improve outcomes for specific student groups, ranging from \$1.3 and \$3.2 million dollars.

Table 3  
*Overview of Student Equity Plan Activities and Funding*

Level	Total Funding	Total Activities	Black Student Focused Funds and Activities	Latinx Student Focused Funds and Activities
LACCD	\$17,573,573	178	\$3,532,660 57	\$3,258,085 40
Campus 1 <sup>5</sup>	\$3,000,000	15	\$394,341 2	\$865,971 5
Campus 2	\$2,200,000	16	\$31,500 1	\$757,108 7
Campus 3	\$1,300,000	21	\$733,731 13	\$160,995 4
Campus 4	\$1,300,000	29	Funds Not Reported <sup>6</sup> 10	Funds Not Reported 1
Campus 5	\$2,100,000	26	\$1,543,265 17	\$100,000 1
Campus 6	\$1,400,000	20	Funds Not Reported 0	\$1,249,011 14
Campus 7	\$2,100,000	8	\$610,330 1	\$125,000 1
Campus 8	\$2,100,000	19	No Activities <sup>7</sup> 9	Funds Not Reported 3
Campus 9	\$1,400,000	24	\$219,493 4	No Activities 0

We examined those 178 activities to see if they identified Black and Latinx students as facing inequity, and if they did, what type of interventions were proposed to mitigate those gaps and the funds spent to support those interventions (See Table 4). We found that 97 (54%) of these activities identified disproportionate impact for Black and Latinx students. Black students were primarily targeted in 57 activities with \$3.5 million allocated to carry out the proposed interventions. Black students were targeted in over one-third of all the activities proposed in the sample. Latinx students were primarily targeted in 40 activities with \$3.2 million allocated to support those interventions. In our sample, institutions' equity efforts targeted Black students with 17 more activities than Latinx students. The high number of activities concentrated in supporting Black students is noteworthy as they comprise only 11% of the student enrollment in the district, while Latinx students are over 57%.

Table 4  
*Breakdown of Student Equity Plan Activities for Black and Latinx Students*

Activity Category	# of Activities	% of Plan Activities	Reported Funds Used	% of Total Funds Reported
All Equity Plans	178	100%	\$12,904,000	100%
Identified Equity Gap for Black Students	57	32%	\$3,530,000	27%
Identified Equity Gap for Latinx Students	40	22%	\$3,230,000	25%
Explicitly Addressed Black Students	16	9%	\$1,269,671	10%
Explicitly Addressed Latinx Students	12	7%	\$559,004	4%
Overlap in Black and Latinx Activities	10	6%	\$1,167,424	9%

When examining the funds allocated to support the 97 activities that primarily identified Black and Latinx students, both groups received similar amounts of support, with a 25% and 27% share of the funds reported. Interestingly, Latinx students had a larger share of funds than their

<sup>5</sup> Individual campuses were anonymized to provide a level of confidentiality. Funding totals rounded

<sup>6</sup> "Funds Not Reported" refers to equity plans that did not include how proposed activities would be funded.

<sup>7</sup> "No Activities" indicates that the no activities were proposed for the specific racial group of interest.



proportion of activities proposed. Conversely, Black students received a lower share of funds than the proportion of activities targeting them. Of those 97 activities, only 10 of them overlapped between those that focused primarily on Black and Latinx students. We also found distinctions in the targeted areas of inequity (i.e., basic skills, transfer) for each student group. These contrasting focal efforts in the equity plans are highlighted in the following section.

**What areas of student success are Black and Latinx students identified in?** When examining the activities for Black and Latinx students, there were some contrasting areas of emphasis (See Table 5). For Black students, activities across the nine plans were focused on addressing basic skills (e.g., using acceleration courses to improve math progression rates) and campus-wide improvement efforts (e.g., professional development workshop to better support men of color). For Latinx students, equity plan activities focused on improving transfer (i.e., additional transfer pathways advising) and course completion (e.g., new early alert systems to improve persistence). Each of the six indicators required to be examined received at least one activity to improve Latinx or Black student equity on campus. For both racial groups, access and degree completion indicators received the least amount of attention in terms of proposing solutions to mitigate equity gaps.

In aggregate, district-wide activities across all indicators showed less variation, with each indicator ranging between 13% and 20% of the total share of activities. The activities proposed by indicator for Latinx students showed wider variation, between one activity (3%) proposed in degree completion and 15 (38%) proposed in transfer. For Black students, the variation was even more dispersed: only one activity was proposed for transfer (2%) while 19 activities (33%) were proposed for basic skills (See Table 5).

Table 5  
*Concentration of Activities by Indicator*

Indicator Area	Latinx	Black	All Activities
Access	5	2	36
Course Completion	9	9	31
Basic Skills	8	19	34
Degree Completion	1	8	23
Transfer	15	1	28
Campus Wide	2	18	26
Total Reported	40	57	178

Figure 2 visualizes the ways activities were concentrated across the six educational indicators for Black and Latinx students as well as the district averages. By visualizing our data in this way, there were clear differences in the type of equity-activities proposed for each group. We asked ourselves: What does it mean for transfer to be the priority for Latinx students? What does it mean for Basic Skills to be the focal effort for Black students? Recent research finds that Latinx transfer inequity is one of the largest challenges in improving student success and increasing college completion (Acevedo-Gil et al., 2015; Contreras & Contreras, 2015). The data we report reflects the “transfer crisis” for Latinx and the ways that student equity plans invest resources, planning, and programs to address them (Gándara, Alvarado, Driscoll, & Orfield, 2012). Similarly, Black students have been found to be disproportionately placed in remedial education and face significant barriers in the progression from lower level math and English sequences to transfer-level courses (Ngo &

Melguizo, 2016; Wood & Harris, 2016). These patterns seem to indicate that activities proposed in the planning process align with the documented areas of need for both Black and Latinx students.

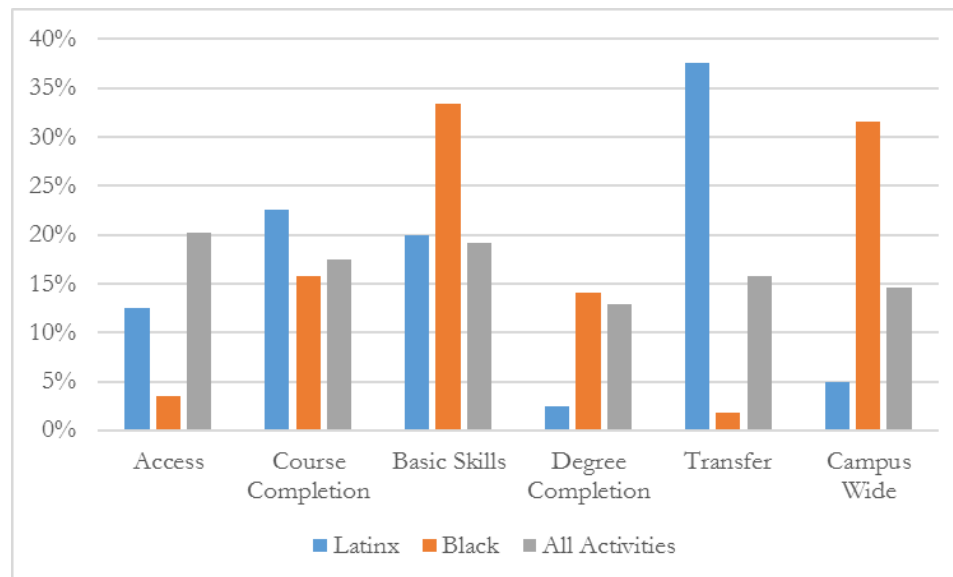


Figure 2. Share of Activities Proposed by Educational Indicator

**Explicitly Addressing Black and Latinx Students.** Further disaggregation of those 57 activities that identified Black and Latinx students found that only 28 (16%) of all activities explicitly addressed those student groups. To help make this distinction between “identifying- activities” and “explicit-activities,” we offer two examples. In the first example, Campus 3 identified Black students as facing large gaps in developmental math. They proposed to mitigate the gaps by expanding the operation hours of the math-tutoring lab on campus and hiring more tutors who specialized in basic-skills math. In their details of the proposed activity, there was no explicit connection to the target group. That is, they identified Black students, but proposed a general intervention to improve basic skills progression. This highlights the category of identifying- activities that targeted Black or Latinx students but did not adequately address them in the actual strategies proposed to improve outcomes. On the other hand, an example of an explicit-activity was how Campus 1 identified Latinas as the student group facing the largest gaps in transfer within their equity plan. In the description of the activity intended to mitigate this equity gap, the college proposed to develop a “Latina Transfer Program” built on “Chicana epistemology” that provided culturally relevant support. Explicit activities have a clear connection between the identified group and the approach taken to address the equity gaps. As mentioned, these activities were less prevalent in the student equity plans examined: only 12 were found for Latinx and 16 for Black students (see Table 6).

Table 6  
Mapping the Promising Activities for Black and Latinx Students

	Campus 1	Campus 2	Campus 3	Campus 4	Campus 5	Campus 6	Campus 7	Campus 8	Campus 9
Access							LATINX	BLACK	
Course Completion			BOTH		BLACK			BLACK	
Basic Skills			BLACK	BOTH		LATINX	BLACK		
Degree Completion								BOTH	
Transfer	LATINX	LATINX				LATINX		LATINX	
Campus Wide		BLACK			BLACK				
Total Promising Activities	1	5	5	6	2	4	2	6	0

We placed importance on this level of disaggregation since research has found that mitigation of equity gaps and improved student success outcomes for students of color are more successful when culturally-relevant strategies, programs, and practices are used as interventions (Contreras & Contreras, 2015; Rendon, 2002). Below we mapped out the 28 activities found to explicitly address Black and Latinx students using CUE’s equity asset typology (See Table 7). We further explore these promising activities in the third findings section that ties these efforts to each equity asset type.

Table 7  
Promising Activities by Campus and Asset Type

Institution	Structures	Program	Personnel	Practice	Policies	Total Activities
Campus 1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Campus 2	0	0	2	0	0	2
Campus 3	0	3	2	0	0	5
Campus 4	1	1	2	2	0	6
Campus 5	0	0	1	1	0	2
Campus 6	1	1	0	2	0	4
Campus 7	1	0	0	1	0	2
Table 7 cont.						
Campus 8	3	3	0	0	0	6
Campus 9	0	0	0	0	0	0
District Wide	6	9	7	6	0	28

### Differences between Focused and Aggregated Student Equity Activities

The SEP Policy required community colleges to develop an equity plan that examined student success data across six “indicators” of institutional performance: Access, Basic Skills Progression, Course Completion, Degree and Certificate Completion, Transfer, and Campus-Wide Initiatives. Each community college was tasked with examining data in these six indicators for different student categories: racial/ethnic groups, gender, socioeconomic status, ability status,

veteran status, and foster youth status. Once the analysis for equity gaps was conducted, colleges then identified student groups that were seen as facing disproportionate impact (i.e., the largest success gaps). Given all the mandated student groups to calculate inequities for, campuses had over 15 student groups to potentially target across the six categories (e.g. race, gender, ability status). For the nine equity plans reviewed, this resulted in 77 different combinations of student groups identified in activities. These combinations ranged between only two student groups being targeted to eight different groups targeted within a single activity.

We found a clear distinction between the activities where only one or two groups (focused) were targeted compared to activities targeting with three or more (aggregated). Focused activities had some similar characteristics including lengthier intervention descriptions, naming target groups in activity details, and creating new strategies or tailoring existing strategies to support specific groups. These activities that focused on an individual group or pair of groups were labeled *culturally relevant strategies* as they were more race-specific, detailed, and included relevant strategies related to the identify student group(s). In contrast, aggregated activities with three or more identified targets had short and vague descriptions. Also, these activities used umbrella terms such as “diverse groups” “historically marginalized” and “identified targets” to describe the students facing inequities. Lastly, these activities proposed to scale-up existing strategies or proposed an intervention that could support all students. This type of activity was coded as “*equity for all*” since the proposed strategy focused on interventions that did not intentionally target students identified with equity gaps but could benefit all students. This finding was salient as 68% of all activities developed in the nine student equity plans were aggregated, targeting three or more groups. As we mentioned above, there were differences in the type of interventions and strategies described between the 97 activities that identified students and the 28 activities that explicitly addressed students. Only 16 activities were found to target Black students in intentional ways, with six of those activities listed Black students as the only group to be addressed. For Latinx students, 12 activities were found to target them explicitly, and in four, Latinx students were the only group targeted. Below we share excerpts from different plans that highlight the strengths of “focused activities” (i.e., one or two student group targeted) and “aggregated activities” (i.e., three or more student groups).

**Culturally relevant student equity activities.** The strongest plan activities were ones with two or less identified student groups. They were race-specific, culturally relevant, and described evidence-based strategies. For example, Campus 8 identified only two groups, Latinx and Black students, facing disproportionate impact for degree completion. The activity they propose focused on “develop[ing] a support program to provide targeted and comprehensive services to Latino and African-American students, particularly males.” In their description of the intervention strategies, the plan details specific ways to support these student groups. Below we share an excerpt from their equity plan details:

- 1) Develop an academic learning community or cohort model that would pair a Chicano or Black Studies or Sociology class,
- 2) Establish a budget and hire a program coordinator to plan and administer program activities,
- 3) Secure a permanent location with adequate facilities to house the [Formal Name Omitted] program,
- 4) Hire and/or assign a counselor to work with the Black/Latino students.

Another example comes from Campus 1 where they found that Latinas faced the largest gaps in transfer success. The activity proposed targeted only one group and detailed ways to mitigate those inequities. In their equity plan, they stated:

[To] decrease the time to transfer for Latina students that have taken more than 10 years to transfer. We will implement an accelerated cohort program model for Latina

women that includes Math and/or English bridge programming, and student support and learning services (leadership training, and self-agency support). Additionally, we will provide mentors and role-models from the community that can relate to these students.

The last example is from Campus 3, which was the only institution to propose a transfer-related activity to improve Black student success. In their proposed activity, they planned to use part of their equity funds to hire an “HBCU counselor” that would work with all students and specifically the “Umoja” program<sup>8</sup> (Black student support program) to “identify and advise Black students interested in transfer” and “plan college field trips, workshops, and mentoring activities” to improve “persistence in the transfer pathway and ultimately to transfer.”

**“Equity for All” examples.** Plan activities with multiple target groups often identified students of color as facing equity gaps but provided vague details on how the activities would support these students. To illustrate this point, a college may have examined the basic skills indicator and found that five different student groups were facing inequities in math course progression. This college found that women, foster youth, students with disabilities, Latinas, and African-American students were all identified as facing gaps in basic skills. Although each student group may need different support strategies or resources, the college would propose a single activity to address all groups facing gaps in basic skills math, such as proposing to expand tutoring in the math lab.

In our analysis, there were many more activities that identify specific student groups, but did not tailor their strategies or interventions. Most of these proposed activities offered generic solutions such as expanding library hours, adding more tutors, or updating marketing materials that did not account for factors that may affect specific student groups. These types of groups were coded as “equity for all” in our analysis process. For example, Campus 2 had identified “Latino, Black, Male, Foster Youth, Students with Disabilities, and veteran students” as facing inequities in course completion. The activity proposed to use a portion of their equity funds to extend library hours. In the activity details, the campus shared that these identified groups would benefit from the “ability to study at [the] College library for extended hours of operation.” Although the scaling of services may be beneficial to students, it is difficult to know how just expanding operational hours can help to mitigate inequities in course completion. Many other colleges used these types of activities. Campus 4 identified “Black, Latino, Pacific Islander, and Male” students has facing inequities in course completion. Their activity focused on “expanding Language Arts Writing Lab so that it is offered seven days a week.” Here the emphasis again was on scaling-up existing services without considering how the specific groups identified could benefit in strategic ways from the proposed activity.

### **Finding 3: Equity Gaps Can Be Found, But What About Solutions?**

Our final theme examines some of the characteristics of the institutions in our sample to contextualize the type of equity activities proposed. During our analysis of these student equity plans we captured contextual information such as the lead units overseeing the planning effort (i.e., Academic Affairs, Student Services), details on the coordinating individual, committee size, and campus representation. The use of these data helped us to understand who the people were in charge of developing the student equity plans we analyzed (See Table 8).

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<sup>8</sup> Umoja, a Kiswahili word meaning unity, is student success program dedicated to enriching and enhancing the cultural and educational experiences of African American as well as other students. Umoja actively serves and promotes student success for all students through a curriculum and pedagogy responsive to the legacy of the African and African American Diasporas.

Table 8  
*Characteristics Describing the Student Equity Planning Process*

Institution	Promising Practices	Coordinator Context				Committee Size
		Division Lead	Position	Gender	Race	
Campus 1	1	Student Services	Student Equity Coordinator	Female	Latina	20
Campus 2	2	Achieving the Dream	Professor, Student Equity Faculty Coordinator	Male	Asian	19
Campus 3	5	Academic Affairs	Student Equity Coordinator	Female	Latina	29
Campus 4	6	Academic Affairs	Dean of Academic Affairs	Female	Latina	20
Campus 5	2	Academic Affairs	Academic Success Director	Female	White	24
Campus 6	4	Student Equity	Student Equity Coordinator	Female	Black	17
Campus 7	2	Academic Affairs	VP of Academic Affairs	Female	Latina	15
Campus 8	6	Student Equity	Student Equity Coordinator	Female	Latina	35
Campus 9	0	Student Services	Acting Dean	Female	Latina	30

*Note.* Data is drawn directly from “Planning Committee and Collaboration” section of submitted plans.

Across the nine campuses in our sample, the compositions of equity committees were fairly consistently. As could be expected in a bottom-up approach, differences between committees’ make up were found, but our analysis did not reveal any obvious outliers in size or campus representation. For example, while the range in the size of equity planning committees was somewhat wide, 15-35 members, the distribution was consistent: three committees had 15-19 members, four had 20-29 members, and two had over 30 members. Similarly, the committees all seemed to have broad representation from campus units, including student services, academic affairs, basic skills, institutional effectiveness, and student representatives. The most noticeable difference among the committees was the coordinator’s position and the division they represented. Most coordinators in the sample held multiple positions and represented different divisions: only four were exclusively equity coordinators and only two represented campus student equity. Once we compared this contextual data to the number of promising practices, there were no patterns that helped us understand why some colleges develop equity efforts to explicitly address Black and Latinx students.

Our integration of CUE’s (2017) “Equity Effort Assessment” allowed us to explore which types of activities equity committees believed could be solutions to their campus inequities. Of the 178 activities proposed by campuses in our sample, most activities aimed to improve personnel and practices (see Table 9). A total 57 activities (32%) focused on practices while 52 activities (29%) focused on personnel. These activities include hiring personnel for new programs or to expand existing services, such as coordinators for support services, or professional development to expand practitioners’ capacity and skills. Activities aimed at structures and policies were the least common, with only three activities focused on policies (2%) and 22 focused on structures (12%). Each of these types of activity can serve to reduce equity gaps, but our analyses suggest that only 28 of the 178 activities were promising practices.

Table 9  
*Equity Activities by Asset Type*

<b>CUE Asset Type</b>	<b>All Equity Activities</b>	<b>% of All Activities</b>	<b>All Promising Activities</b>	<b>% of Promising Activities</b>
Structures	22	12%	6	21%
Program	44	25%	9	32%
Personnel	52	29%	7	25%
Practice	57	32%	6	21%
Policies	3	2%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>178</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>100%</b>

Activities identified as promising were explicitly focused on Black and Latinx students and propose culturally relevant solutions. Furthermore, we categorized promising activities by assets type to see how which institutional areas were most likely to undergo changes. Most promising activities were programs and personnel assets, which is understandable given the need for personnel to sustain new programs (see Table 10). These program based activities focused on creating, continuing, or expanding programs that have demonstrated value to the targeted student groups. For example, at least two campus allocated equity funds for the Puente program, one for the coordinator to be able to continue the program and the other to expand the Puente Center’s capacity. While personnel efforts included hiring and professional development for culturally relevant or equity-focused activities, such as hiring coordinators for Black and Latinx success programs or organizing equity professional development events. Nine of the 28 promising activities were program assets (32%) while seven focused on personnel assets (25%). One the other hand, activities focused on policies (2%) and on structures (21%) were the least common. This suggests that most campuses sought to address student equity by expanding their programs’ and personnel’s capacity to support students rather than engaging in large-scale and long-term changes to institutions’ policies and structures.

Across the campuses, the number of promising practices also varied (see Table 10). Campus four and eight both had the most promising activities with six each, followed by Campus three with

Table 10  
*28 Promising Practices by Institution and Asset Type*

<b>Indicator</b>	<b>Structures</b>	<b>Program</b>	<b>Personnel</b>	<b>Practice</b>	<b>Policies</b>	<b>Total Activities</b>
Campus 1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Campus 2	0	0	2	0	0	2
Campus 3	0	3	2	0	0	5
Campus 4	1	1	2	2	0	6
Campus 5	0	0	1	1	0	2
Campus 6	1	1	0	2	0	4
Campus 7	1	0	0	1	0	2
Campus 8	3	3	0	0	0	6
Campus 9	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>District Wide</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>28</b>

five promising activities and Campus six with four activities. On the other end, Campus nine had the fewest promising activities with zero and the remaining campuses (1, 2, 5, and 7) had either one to two promising activities. While trying to understand the differences between campuses, we considered whether the makeup of each campus's student equity committee was related to the different numbers of promising activities.

The campuses that proposed the highest number of promising practices did not have many contextual differences compared to campuses that proposed few promising practices. The two campuses with the most promising activities had similarities such as campus-wide representation among committee members, as well as differences such as differing committee size (35 and 20) and positions held by their student equity coordinator (i.e. student equity and academic affairs). Characteristics of the two high performing campuses, however, were not much different from campuses with few promising activities. Campus 9, for example, also had broad campus representation and a committee size of 30 people, but had the fewest promising activities. These three campuses were on opposite ends in terms of the number of promising activities proposed, but their coordinators and their committee composition did not stand out from our sample. While the composition of equity committees is important for developing and implementing the equity plans, it did not seem determine how many promising practices were ultimately adopted in the equity plans.

More in depth ground-level qualitative research of the equity committee planning process is needed to understand how and why some campuses proposed more promising practices. Our analysis of student equity committees and the plans they developed raised important questions about how student equity policies are used by equity planning committees to address racial inequalities for Black and Latinx students on their campuses. As we discuss in the following section, equity-minded policymakers, researchers, and college practitioners should consider: 1) what cognitive frameworks or funds of knowledge do equity planning committee members have for developing equity minded and culturally relevant activities? 2) Do committee members have ability to be race-conscious during the decision making process for equity plans? and 3) How planning guidelines and training can prompt the equity planning process to be used to address inequities for Black and Latinx students?

## **Discussion**

The Student Equity Policy (SEP) required every California community college to develop a plan to identify and address student equity gaps. Our study explored the content of these plans, how they were developed, and highlighted the equity strategies targeting Black and Latinx students. By analyzing equity plans in this way, we were able to understand in which areas Black and Latinx students' inequities are identified, the specific activities developed to support them, and the categorical funds used to implement change on campus. Our findings indicate that although plans identified gaps for Black or Latinx students, most activities did not adequately address the causes of inequities experienced by racially minoritized students. These findings contribute to policymakers' and practitioners' understanding of how equity planning can be used to improve student success. We raise two discussion points related to race-conscious strategic planning in higher education, generally, and ways to strengthen the student equity planning process, specifically. First, institutional actors involved planning processes need to be able to have a narrow focus, including explicitly targeting racially minoritized populations. Second, for policymakers mandating planning initiatives, we recommend the expansion of training and capacity-building opportunities for developing race-conscious solutions.



### **Expanding Practitioner Capacity for Race-Conscious Planning**

Simply talking about race can be difficult and even more so when discussing strategies to address issues experienced by Black, Latinx, and other students of color in higher education (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017). The SEP is intended to address equity gaps experienced by racially minoritized student groups among others. As the second finding of our study indicates, however, equity planning committees tended to disaggregate student groups when identifying equity gaps, but the activities they proposed tend to aggregate multiple student groups and were not culturally relevant (see Tables 4 and 6). Without a focus on specific student groups, equity gaps experienced by racially minoritized students will likely persist even if overall performance outcomes improve (Ching, 2013; Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). Policymakers and practitioners need to consider how to encourage and facilitate race-consciousness throughout the student equity planning process.

Without a race-conscious and equity-minded cognitive framework, even well-intentioned activities can be framed through a deficient-minded framework and fail to address institutional causes of equity gaps (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012). Practitioners and institutions may be hesitant to be race-conscious during their equity planning and funding allocation processes given the “anti-affirmative action” legal and public discourse, especially in post-Prop 209 California (Gandara, 2012; Garces, 2014). Although affirmative action in education mainly applies to admissions and not to services for enrolled students, public discourse tends to frame race-conscious decisions as reverse discrimination and counter to ideals of meritocracy (Garces, 2014; Tatum, 2010). However, color-blind policies and practices tend to negatively affect students of color and thus hinder efforts to mitigate equity gaps (Bonilla-Silva, 2009; Bensimon, 2007). In order for activities included in student equity plans to address equity gaps among racially-minoritized student groups, equity committee members must be able to talk about race, racism, and the causes of persistent racial inequity (Carter, et al., 2017).

### **Developing Data-Driven, Evidence-Based, and Culturally-Relevant Activities**

The reform effort established within the California Community College system continues and builds on strategic planning trends in educational policy by including student equity as a central focus. However, while a focus on equity is necessary, it is not sufficient. In addition to using data to identify equity gaps, equity committees need to be able to develop appropriate solutions for those equity gaps identified. The SEP has provided equity committees with guidelines, methods, and training to collect and analyze campus data, identify equity gaps, and create student equity plans with goals and proposed solutions to mitigate those gaps. However, the SEP’s bottom-up approach has resulted in significantly less support for committees to develop data-driven, evidence-based, culturally relevant, and equity-minded solutions.

Our analysis of the student equity plans found that while committees disaggregated data by student groups to identify equity gaps, the activities proposed tended to take an ‘equity for all’ approach and were less culturally relevant. So while 178 activities identified equity gaps experienced by Black and Latinx students, only 28 of those explicitly address those student groups and sought to mitigate equity gaps in culturally relevant ways. The limited number of activities that were explicitly focused and culturally relevant prompted us to question whether equity committees were proposing equity-minded solutions to the gaps they were finding. Bensimon’s (2007) concept of equity-mindedness suggests that in order to mitigate equity gaps for racially minoritized students, plans and activities need to be race-conscious, awareness of systemic inequities, focus on remediating practice, and advancing equity. As previously mentioned, the tendency among equity plans to aggregate targeted student groups and the lack of culturally relevant activities suggest a lack of race-consciousness in the equity planning process. Furthermore, achieving equitable outcomes involves

institutions undergoing a model of change based on on-going practitioner inquiry to address the latter three characteristics of equity-mindedness (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). The SEP prompted committees to use campus data and their expertise to determine where specific student groups were being disproportionately impacted and where institutional change is needed, but the inquiry process continues throughout the implementation process and afterward so that the impact of those activities is critically assessed. Improving the inquiry process supports equity committees in developing solutions that are based on data and evidence from each colleges' context. Additionally, on-going practitioner inquiry encourages committee members to reflect on their practices and institutional structures that contribute to equity. In order to promote equity-minded solutions, the SEP will need to provide additional support and guidance for equity committees to increase their capacity to develop data-driven, evidence-based, and culturally relevant activities.

## **Conclusion**

As this study illuminates, equity planning can serve as a strategy for addressing long-standing inequities for Black and Latinx students in community college. In our efforts to understand the planning process across the Los Angeles Community College District, we found campuses using the SEP as a tool to identify their equity gaps and map out the areas of inequity to address. Through the availability of new categorical funds, colleges not only developed an awareness of inequities but were enabled to take action in various ways. As we reported, some campuses took an equity for all approach, using the planning process to expanding existing services that could benefit all students on campus. To a lesser extent, some campuses proposed detailed strategies in their equity plans that addressed student inequities in culturally relevant ways that aligned with the specific groups identified.

The documents we reviewed and evaluated found that institutions overwhelmingly focused their equity efforts on addressing some of the most persistent racial disparities in community college. Moving forward, we find it necessary to reign in the policy in two ways. First we argue that the scope of the SEP should focus on fewer institutional performance indicators. Refining the scope is particularly important as the state has passed separate reform efforts to improve access (Student Success and Support Program) and basic skills (Basic Skills Transformation Grant). The planning process could be improved if campuses only focused on course completion, degree attainment, and transfer success. Second, we recommend the Chancellor's Office, who oversees statewide implementation, encourages campuses to develop activities and use funds in more intentional ways that target student groups who face specific barriers in explicit ways. Through a more intentional approach, equity planning can be used as a strategy to mitigate racial inequity and redistribute resources to the students who need them most. In this sense, equity funds should be seen through a redistributive lens where those students who have been most vulnerable receive more of the funds. Achieving equity is not about treating students equally, it is about being just and providing additional resources for closing outcome gaps (Bensimon & Malcolm, 2012). Additionally, further research needs to be conducted to understand how the planning efforts described in the student equity plans are translated into campus practices and eventually the improvement of educational outcomes for racially minoritized students.

Addressing racial inequity in community college is complex, but our research found efforts by campuses attempting to disrupt inequitable practices and develop new strategies for transformative change and more equitable outcomes. Our hope is that policymakers funding the SEP as well as practitioners developing the strategies will see the possibilities of equity planning as a tool to improve racial equity. As we mentioned, the planning process could benefit by narrowing the

scope of proposed activities to deliberately and strategically address the specific student groups facing gaps in educational outcomes. This study provides findings, discussion points, and recommendations to use the planning process as a more effective strategy to improve racial equity in community college.

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## Appendix

Table A1

*Institutional Characteristics of the Nine Community Colleges*

Institution	2015-2016			Level of Urbanization	2015-2016
	Student Headcount	Black Enrollment	Latinx Enrollment		Student Equity Funds
Campus 1	30,000+	3.9%	67.5%	City	> \$ 2,000,000
Campus 2	30,000+	7.6%	56.2%	City	< \$ 2,000,000
Campus 3	10-14,999	11.3%	55.7%	City	< \$ 2,000,000
Campus 4	15-19,999	2.7%	78.6%	City	< \$ 2,000,000
Campus 5	30,000+	5.4%	44.9%	City	> \$ 2,000,000
Campus 6	10-14,999	42.3%	49.2%	Suburb	< \$ 2,000,000
Campus 7	25-29,999	19.4%	65.0%	City	> \$ 2,000,000
Campus 8	25-29,999	5.0%	49.4%	City	> \$ 2,000,000
Campus 9	15-19,999	27.2%	42.5%	Suburb	< \$ 2,000,000
LACCD	233,324	11%	57.7%	N/A	\$ 17,500,000
State-Wide	2,353,952	6%	43%	N/A	\$ 155,000,000

Table A2

*Articulated Goals by Indicator per Campus*

Indicator	Access	Course Completion	Basic Skills	Degree Completion	Transfer	Campus Wide	Total Activities
Campus 1	3	2	2	2	3	3	15
Campus 2	3	3	3	1	3	3	16
Campus 3	3	5	7	2	2	2	21
Campus 4	10	4	7	5	3	0	29
Campus 5	3	3	1	1	2	16	26
Campus 6	4	5	3	3	5	0	20
Campus 7	2	1	2	1	1	1	8
Campus 8	3	3	5	3	4	1	19
Campus 9	5	5	4	5	5	0	24
District Wide	36	31	34	23	28	26	178



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