

PATHWAYS TO RESULTS

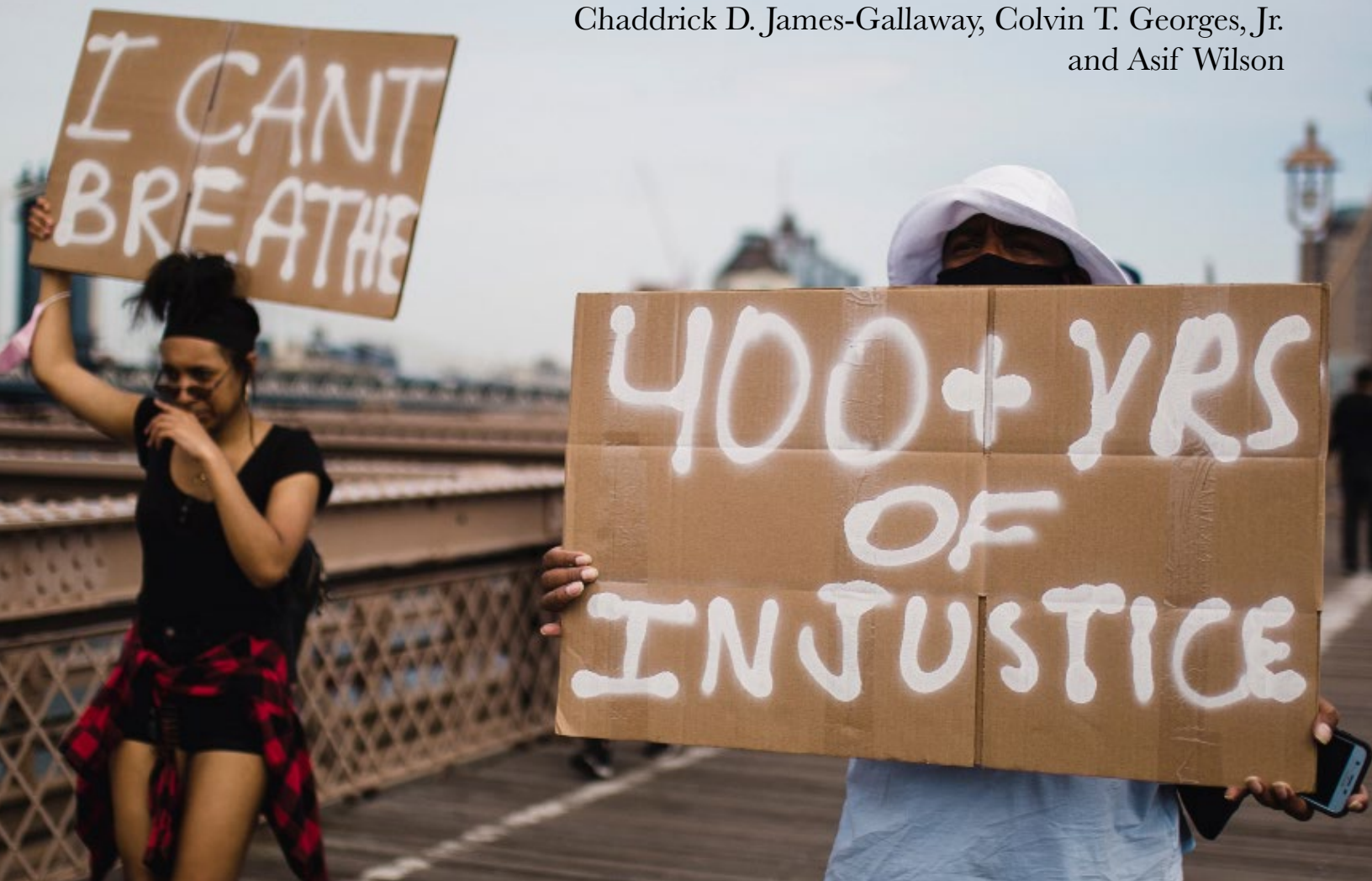
Implementation Partnerships
Strategy Brief

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Equity and Justice: How one Community College Addressed Racial Equity Gaps through a Professional Development Opportunity

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Harold Washington College (HWC), one of seven institutions in the City Colleges of Chicago system, is located in the downtown business district is a minority-serving community college and federally eligible to become a Hispanic-serving community college (HSCC). During the 2018-2019 academic year, HWC was a recipient of the Pathways to Results (PTR) Implementation Communities grant funded by the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), with support from the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL). The college's PTR project focused on identifying how white supremacist capitalistic patriarchy harmed the institution and its racially minoritized students (James-Gallaway, 2019).

Faculty, staff, and administrators needed to understand how structural systems of inequity disadvantaged Black and Latinx students within the institution, as well as the long-term effects on students' academic and social performance (James-Gallaway, 2019). The PTR team found that deficit mindsets from HWC personnel (faculty, administrators, and staff) rooted in white supremacist capitalistic patriarchy resulted in inequitable student outcomes and racial equity gaps (James-Gallaway, 2019).

In addition, institutional policies and inequitable processes, often benefiting white students, have caused instances of academic underperformance of racially minoritized students, regardless of their intellectual abilities. The PTR team recognized that dismantling deficit mindsets was critical to closing existing racial equity gaps and created a 16-week professional development Equity and Justice Leadership Academy (EJLA) (James-Gallaway, 2019).

The Equity and Justice Leadership Academy

The EJLA was created by Dr. Asif Wilson, associate dean of instruction at HWC, and informed by numerous researchers, scholars, educators, and practitioners within higher education (James-Gallaway, 2019). Participation in the EJLA was voluntary and open to all faculty, staff, and administrators at HWC. A total of 10 participants and two faculty facilitators participated in the EJLA. Following receipt of the original PTR grant,





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the college was awarded an Educational Leaders Equity-Centered Transformation (ELECT) Spark Grant as part of the Equity Conscious Community College Pathways (EC3P) project, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, to gain insight into the experiences of the participants.

A key component of the EJLA's formation was through the lens of culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris, 2012, 2016; Paris & Alim, 2017) and other equity-based, focused models around culturally relevant pedagogy based on the work of Ladson-Billings (2000) and Freire (1995).

The EJLA intended to increase participants' understanding of equity and justice and influence their future actions to improve campus conditions for racially minoritized students.

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Wilson (2020) recognized that colleges and universities across the nation developed “equity initiatives,” which often resulted in little to no improvement of educational outcomes for Black and Latinx students.

He attributed this to the deficit mindsets of practitioners and other leaders responsible for student success. Wilson (2020) also stated that “a roadblock to more equitable outcomes may be rooted in the beliefs and mindsets of faculty, staff, and administration in school spaces.” By participating in the EJLA, employees at HWC shifted their

deficit mindsets to a more equity-conscious outlook. The hope is that these practices lead to improved academic outcomes for racially minoritized students and an increased sense of belonging to HWC, a critical component for student success.

Themes from Preliminary Data

Data collection for the project included 12 preliminary and post surveys as well as nine semi-structured interviews with findings that revealed two themes, the first of which was termed “pedagogy of love.” This involved participants recognizing the classroom as a relationship-building space where meaningful interactions with students occur, in order to challenge their dominant beliefs around whiteness. Following the conclusion of the EJLA, multiple participants shared how they would embed practices of love and care into their interactions with students. Additionally, EJLA participants were explicit in naming the benefits of the seminar and a need for more campus conversations on equity and justice.

The second theme was identified as “toward wokeness.” This theme emerged as participants unlearned certain world views that they held and opened their minds to see how systems of oppression—issues such as racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism—have led to structural inequity. These inequities negatively affected the academic and social experiences of racially minoritized students. Participants were able to develop an awareness of these oppressive forces by locating institutional processes, policies, and practices that widened racial equity gaps. While it is essential to note the participants' increased awareness of structural oppression at HWC, additional findings revealed that the EJLA provided a reflexive space for members to share prior knowledge of equity and justice and their assumptions about the lived experiences of racially minoritized students. The space also allowed participants to share their aspirations of becoming equity conscious and identifying institutionalized systems of oppression, which widened racial equity gaps. This was accomplished through a diverse set of weekly exercises such as readings, multimedia resources, and co-facilitated dialogues.

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The Future of the Equity and Justice Leadership Academy

As noted within their PTR strategy brief (James-Gallaway, 2019), sustaining and scaling the EJLA is a concern for HWC, mainly because funding limitations presented a barrier for this professional development opportunity. Expenses included funding for renting a classroom and paying for the co-facilitators and refreshments. These line items have allowed for meaningful interactions, critically needed education, and consistent communication among participants. COVID-19 is affecting operations at HWC, similar to higher education institutions nationwide. Though funding limitations and the global pandemic disrupted the delivery of content for the EJLA, recent social movements such as the fight for racial justice and movements related to police brutality may give further impetus for the continuation of the program.

Concluding Thoughts

American society is plagued by white supremacist capitalistic patriarchy. As a result, the personnel at HWC believes there is a continuous need for the EJLA and other initiatives to support historically oppressed students. When discussing equity and justice at HWC, it is not enough to only host seminars and professional development training for employees. Faculty and staff members must also embed tools of equity, justice, and love into their daily practices to uncover and dismantle systems of oppression.

By embedding these tools, the likelihood of students feeling a sense of belonging increases, and their chances of completion are greater.

As part of its commitment to student success, the City Colleges of Chicago system recently implemented the “Fresh Start” student debt forgiveness program (Masterson, 2020). Programs like Fresh Start and the EJLA are needed to support students at HWC because most of them are Black and Latinx. Due to structural racism and inequity, these students have accumulated high-interest loans and experienced racialized barriers that thwart academic progress—hence, their inability to complete. HWC personnel must continue to do more for the institution’s students. Social and economic changes such as the aforementioned steps offer the potential for a positive transformation toward closing existing racial equity gaps. But these changes should not be viewed as the only solution for this community. HWC has a long history of oppression that negatively harmed the lives of racially minoritized students on the campus. The programs highlighted in this brief should serve as a catalyst for other social issues that must be addressed to ensure equitable outcomes for all students.

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