

# Root Analysis and Addressing Structural Racism in Pathways



Guest Host

**Jason Keist**

**Research Associate**

*University of Pittsburgh*



**Dr. Susana Muñoz**

**Associate Professor**

*Colorado State University-Fort Collins*



**Dr. Michael Baston**

**President**

*SUNY Rockland Community College*

## Root Analysis and Addressing Structural Racism in Pathways

**Jason Keist:** Hello everyone. My name is Jason Keist. I'm a Research Associate and doctoral candidate at the Office of Community College Research and Leadership. This podcast is part of the REACH collaborative series wherein scholars and practitioners discuss ways to advance equitable pathways for racially minoritized adult community college students.

Today we will be speaking with Dr. Susana Muñoz and Dr. Michael Baston about addressing structural racism in community college pathways, as well as how a root analysis can aid in accomplishing this goal. Welcome everyone. Would you each briefly talk about your role and institutional affiliations?

**Dr. Susana Muñoz:** Thank you for having me. My name is Susana Muñoz. My pronouns are she, her, hers. And I am an Associate Professor at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, Colorado, and currently on sabbatical here in lovely and very hot Arizona.

**Dr. Michael Baston:** I'm Michael Baston, President of Cuyahoga Community College in the great state of Ohio, which is rainy at the moment.

**Jason Keist:** So, excellent. So, really just kind of first off, kind of want to get into for our listeners what a root analysis is and how can it help us identify factors contributing to institutional structural racism at community colleges?

**Dr. Susana Muñoz:** So, I'll say a little bit about that and also just say sort of like, how I'm entering into this conversation is that for the last 14 years I've been working with and for undocumented and DACA college students. And in particular, in the last five or so years I've been working alongside community colleges.

So that's sort of where I live in my research, but when we talk about root analysis we have to think about Critical Race Theory. We also have to think about how this country has been founded on racism and White supremacy.

The things that come to my mind are the Chinese Exclusionary Act, Jim Crow Laws, those are all policies and legislations that have been passed in our US history that have informed the ways in which people of color are able to access a livelihood in this country.

And so, a root analysis to me really stems from not taking this sort of historical understanding of what the United States of America is, but understanding that we

were founded on White supremacy. And thinking about in what ways does the residual of all of that past play a role in how we enact education today and serve students today? So that's just my two cents on what I think a root analysis is.

**Jason Keist:** That's excellent, thank you.

**Dr. Michael Baston:** Oh, I would agree wholeheartedly with Dr. Muñoz, that laws of our land led to policies and perceptions. We know that the laws that created sort of the structural racism that we currently are still seeking to dismantle.

Where then ultimately, once we were able to find legal strategies to try to address some of these issues, then the policies were put in place so we could actually move beyond the legal means of three fifths of a person, the legal means of keeping voting rights away from citizens, to move to redlining and other specific forms and structures and policies that ultimately work their way into perceptions.

And so even if you look at the way in which we look at television, we look at the sort of news features, we look at the sort of ways that there are perceptions about Black and Brown people as an example. You have to look at the fact that this has been a process over many years, that now folks say, well listen, we've had a Black president now as an example, there's no more need to deal with this conversation cause we've already dealt with the conversation.

Well, he didn't fare so as well as he could have, as we all know because of the experience and then the counterbalance to that sort of experience. So, the country right now is at probably the most sort of, divided in some respects as it was around the Civil War. So, we got to understand that all of these reckonings are only going to ultimately be addressed when we don't just simply make statements, but that we take affirmative steps to change what is going on in our communities. And that's how you have to look at funding and that's how you have to look at systems, that's how you have to look at structures. So, when we talk about a root cause analysis, if we are not willing to start to talk about the legacy, then you can't change the future legacy that we leave.

**Jason Keist:** Excellent. And I'm glad you touched on pretty much saying we're making gains in one area. Essentially this White supremacist structure moved the cup and it just kind of created new processes and now as we move forward to modernity, they're not so blatant. So, that's kind of the next place I want to go is what does structural racism look like at the community college now? Cause it's not segregation anymore, the signs aren't up anymore, so what does it look like? A lot

of practitioners, faculty, staff, I think White in particular, but folks of color as well might struggle and do struggle with kind of putting a face or a form on White racism in the community college. If we could expand on that?

**Dr. Susana Muñoz:** I mean, when you say that segregation is no longer here, yes the signs are no longer here, but that doesn't erase or eradicate the practices. And so, when I think about where particularly Black and Brown students are tracked in our community colleges in terms of a specific course or pathway, that's where I see it still continuing. The other thing that I think about is this legacy that we talk about in terms of the purpose of our community colleges was based on being that equalizer. I think one of the things that I have come to learn is where erasure comes in, and on whose land is this community college on, who was displaced based on this community college. But more importantly, why aren't we telling the history of Black and Brown people at community colleges of the achievements. And so, I also think about the erasure, that sometimes comes with sort of the perpetuation of Whiteness. And so, I think your question in terms of like where community colleges in terms of where we're supposed to be dispelling segregation, we're supposed to be the equalizers. In some cases, we are still reproducing and operating in terms of Whiteness, and I don't necessarily feel like we have a good understanding of that coalition building that has to happen around like how do we have these conversations about white supremacy and it's still here, right? So, I think about where that fear and resistance comes for people, the uncomfortableness that comes for people.

So, I think that's where I think the real change in transformation lies in terms of how do we move from those statements? The beautiful rhetoric that many of our institutions put out there to the substantial action that really has that reckoning that deep apology for who we've displaced, and who we've harmed in this process and how do we reckon with that? But also, how do we shift our policies and practices to really center the humanity of students and their culture in affirming ways and asset based.

**Jason Keist:** Yes. Strengths, perspectives, versus a lot of times we get to the deficit, we've been using deficit paradigms forever for Black and Brown students. Dr. Baston, want to chime in?

**Dr. Michael Baston:** I think as you think about, as I talk about these steps beyond statements. We know that there are very specific defined milestones in a student's

experience and we know that there are systems that prop up those milestones that can have disparate impacts.

Yes, for example, as was mentioned just a moment ago by Dr. Muñoz, this idea of who are you recruiting into what programs for what purpose? So where are we recruiting? What do our recruitment materials look like? Who's actually, we don't just need to see Black and Brown students on my Martin Luther King Scholarship or the Ceasar Chavez Scholarship. What we need to be able to say is that, are there opportunities to high wage, high investment and growth careers that we are recruiting students who have an interest in the community college or any college into those programs? And if there are deficiencies based on the structural racism challenges of the schools that they may have come from, what are going to be the bootcamp strategies? What are going to be the remediative strategies before they have to spend a dime to get into debt to move forward. But because those structures created these gaps, what are we going to do before they get into all the formal academic programs? So where are the bootcamps that get you into these appropriate opportunities that exist? And are we monitoring progress? Are we just monitoring failure? Are we saying before you get to the place where you're having a difficult time that we are monitoring the progress and providing just in time supports instead of just in case supports?

Because what happens is we bring you into an orientation, we tell you all the stuff that you're never going to remember and when you have one mistake, we say well, we told you on day one that this was going to happen and so now it's your fault. And so, we've got to figure out, we know the students' milestones, we know the credit accumulation milestones, we know the payment milestones. If you don't have a certain amount of payments you're going to get stopped out of your class and ultimately you'll fail and now you have debt and now you can't complete. So, we know all of the traps, we know the hiccups, we know the bumps. So, what are we intentionally doing from a system perspective to scale support all along the way?

And it's not enough to observe the problems, I'm very over conversations about the problem. I really am over conversations that say, well, we've got this achievement gap, I'm over those. We know, but what are we going to do about it from a system perspective? Because the system perpetuates the problems, if you want to change the problems, you got to change the system.

**Jason Keist:** You kind of mentioned, we're talking about ways that White supremacy is seen within these systems of day-to-day functioning. And when we speak to that at workshops and things like that and to just the average American it doesn't really make sense.

But one thing I want to touch on really quick is that one example of that would be when you said if you, towards a student, if you mess up, then you are held accountable essentially. Which is a very individualistic perspective of the world versus a collectivistic mentality or philosophy of being.

So even that right there speaks to the embeddedness of White supremacy. If we can really quick, talk about how we change systems? but we recognize individuals are parts, are the cogs in moving that system. So we look at the macro, but how do we get to that micro level change amongst practitioners so they can influence these systems?

**Dr. Susana Muñoz:** And I think that's where the work lies, and I think it goes before anybody steps on your campus or in your classroom. It's about how do we cultivate a culture of racial consciousness, of racial literacy, of transformation. And so, it's about how you also recruit, it's about that orientation, it's also about how you take care of your faculty and staff.

**Jason Keist:** Thank you.

**Dr. Susana Muñoz:** It's about how are we onboarding our faculty, how are we onboarding staff to say this is our value, this is how we want to operate, this is the knowledge, these are the competencies that we expect in the classroom, that we expect when you serve students.

And so that should even be in the application process and the onboarding process. And so, I think there's ways in which, individually that we can look at the system and the process in which we recruit faculty, staff, and students. But I think it also goes hand in hand with how we cultivate that culture.

Nobody's is going to want to stay if you don't live or work in a place where it's not validating. And so, and I say this for mostly staff and faculty, and that's kind of who I have in my head right now after doing a lot of the research alongside these folks is that folks are doing about eight jobs. And so, faculty who are super passionate about working alongside students are not necessarily valued. Where's their voice? How are you enacting their voice because these are the folks that are going to transform the culture. And so, the more that you value, the more that you

include the voices and validate in the work, and compensate them in humane ways, and making sure they make a livable wage, those are the things that I feel need to happen. So, I say this time and time again, we can't workshop our way out of White supremacy, but what we can do is provide and shift the environment and culture for people to thrive and feel validated in, that's reflective of the values and the culture of the student.

**Jason Keist:** That's right. You said a pull-out quote, just saying we can't workshop our way out of white supremacy. I'm just saying, I'm going to pull that out.

**Dr. Michael Baston:** I really think there's sort of two lines of thought from Dr. Muñoz that I really want to lift up. First and foremost, when we talk about institutions having a desire to be inclusively excellent, which is something that I think we all should strive toward, you have to go to the systems that make that happen.

And so, if your candidacy process is not one that allows you to actually get more diverse candidates, if that process is actually set up by folks, for example, where there is no diversity in quite frankly the hiring pools because you've hired in a replicated hiring process where you just recreate the folks because we went to the same schools. And if we don't look at the candidacy process, if we don't look at the first-year experience, not for students but for our employees and develop professional development plans so that they could be successful career development plans for them.

If we don't look at how they're making progress and if there's no opportunities for their professional development so that they ultimately can leave a legacy in an institution. If they don't have the ability to move along the opportunity continuum in an institution because these systems are designed for them not to have those opportunities, then we'll never get to be that inclusively excellent institution that we may aspire to, that we may be putting in our strategic plan, or in our mission statements and on our websites. So that's one very important place where we have to be. The other important place to be, is that Black and Brown people also cannot be, sort of, now the Harriet Tubmans of everyone's experience, because then it puts upon us John Henryism, it puts upon us the responsibility of being the voice of consciousness and the voice of reason and all this kind of stuff, people have to do their own work. And so, from my perspective, institutions that really want to do this work well, have to determine in mass where they are on the continuum of consciousness. Are we an educational institution, by and large, that really gets

angry if you talk about race and gender and the kinds of equity that we have as an expectation? Are you open to the fact that maybe we are not as progressive as we need to be?

Because depending on where the institution is in its continuum of consciousness that determines the specific steps that you have to take. And I think as to your point, Dr. Muñoz, sometimes people think that they can have a book read and then the issue is resolved, or a workshop and the issue is resolved. or we've put anti-racism language in our board report, and therefore that does not make you an anti-racist, and we have to be careful, I also feel, we got to be careful of making anti-racism the litmus test, because what that does is it actually may move people further into the supremacy concept because we are not moving people along the continuum of the evolution of an organization and its culture.

You can't be a racist culture and automatically, because you got a book reader or a mandate tomorrow you're going to advance equitable practices. So, we have to understand where our institutions are along the consciousness continuum, and then determine what very specific steps and strategies have to be employed to move us along the continuum.

Those strategies are student facing and supporting, and employee facing and supporting. And without that kind of systematic approach, because it is a system that actually is promoting the outcomes that exist today. Without a systematic approach, it's very difficult to get institutions to walk into and live up to the aspirations of inclusive excellence.

**Dr. Susana Muñoz:** Yes. All of that. Yes.

**Jason Keist:** Wow. So, we could have this talk for hours. I'm trying to, like...

**Dr. Michael Baston:** I just love Dr. Muñoz. I'm just listening to her.

**Dr. Susana Muñoz:** I'm trying to figure out how to work for you, that's what I'm trying to figure out.

**Jason Keist:** Y'all are excellent. Y'all are great. So, if we can focus into, specific to this REACH collaborative which is focused on adult Black and Brown learners.

Can anyone one of you comment, or both of you comment what might be some of the experiences that are critical to adult learner success and your adult racially minoritized learner? Because honestly this is where my research lies into Black men who are 25 to 45, I consider them, I talk about grown Black men. This is a



kind of a new area and what's really interesting to me is that we've seen this kind of wave of support in focusing on racially minoritized adult learners within the past, I'd say two years and that might be pushing it. Because when I started my research, there was actually no peer reviewed literature on adult Black men. So now we're starting this push. So, what would you say would be specific to racially minoritized adults in community colleges?

**Dr. Susana Muñoz:** In terms of my experiences, I look at it as these adult community college students who are minoritized, I think, have come to the classroom with lots of experience. And so, at times, this is my understanding and my perceptions in talking with students is that they're made to feel less than, in many cases and they come with 10 years of experience being an entrepreneur in some ways. They come with some lived experiences that often don't necessarily get tapped into.

And so, understanding that these students are the experts in many ways in what we're learning in the classroom, how do we change our pedagogy to really tap into that? How do we make room and space for folks to bring in those lived experiences? And I also think that because the juggling of multiple things like family and other work, how do we also re-envision, reimagine classroom spaces to look differently?

I think this is already happening with flex classrooms, but more importantly, how do you bring in that lived experience into the classroom where it is actually centered in the pedagogy? So that's my 2 cents in terms of one way that I see it being played out in a classroom setting.

**Jason Keist:** Excellent.

**Dr. Michael Baston:** I would just add this idea of a pool development strategy, and what I mean by that is, you can't work with people that's not in your pool. And so, you don't have as many adult learners that are eligible to come back to college who have some college but no degree. You don't have enough of them coming because you haven't developed a pool effectively.

You have to go where people are so that you can interest them in what you want them to believe that it's good for them. I think that we have to be very, very careful about deciding what's good for people. You have to make the value proposition such that folks want to actually take advantage of what you have to offer.

And that starts by saying you have some college, no degree, but you did something. You didn't stop living because you got out of school. So how do we look at what you did when you got out of school and how can we appropriately credential that experience? So that when we give you credit for your prior learning and we put you on a new path, we find out from you what you want your path to be, not what we think your path should be. And then ultimately, braid in your lived experience, braid in the credits that you had before you left us, and now with a path that shortens the time to degree completion, shortens the cost of degree completion and shows you a ladder as to what you can accomplish and attain at the front end and not at the backend. There's no need to have any career discussion when to finish the program. If you're asking me to invest my time, my talent, and my energy, if you're trying to tell me that this is going to be good for me per se, I got to be able to see that now.

So, if I'm an adult learner, where's my earn and learn program? Because I can't just do this and not feed my family and not work things out. I need to be able to have hybrid models, whether I can go virtually, whether I can go sometime virtually, sometimes in the class, but I know I need a level of commitment and connection if I'm going to really take advantage of this opportunity because of my competing life responsibilities. So, it's not enough to say to people, well, we got all these programs here why don't you take advantage of it? That's just like saying to the student who can go full time we got a library, why didn't you go to the library? You got a counselor, why didn't you go to the counselor? If you don't embed support for busy people who have lots going on and competing priorities, they're never going to take all the support that you have for them. Instead of saying, go actually and find your advisor and get your schedule together for next semester. Find a course within the program of study, dedicate 30 minutes embedded in that course where they do academic advisement, where they sign up for classes in the next sequence of classes so that you can ensure that they actually are able to get to the next level of classes.

Do the financial aid, there are things that we can do with the systems we have which are not well constructed to embed supports including, where recruit people of color, how do we make sure that they have the embedded supports that are inescapable and ultimately that meet their time requirements as well as informing them of the opportunity up front and not hoping they figure it out on the backend.

For community college, for all colleges, not just community colleges, good luck has been the strategy that we have passed out to students. It is not a strategy and we've got to be better at it.

**Dr. Susana Muñoz:** I would add to it that we also need to work on the transfer process, because what I see too is that students do all this great work at the community colleges and then they lose credit, they lose money when they transfer. And to me, I feel like that's totally unacceptable, but we need to also bring in these other institutions that we're sending students. And how they're receiving our students, is not necessarily in alignment or congruent with what we all should be valuing and working towards.

So, I think that's another element to think about is that coalition building has to also transfer into a four-year institution that needs to also be mindful how they're receiving community college students. So, yes, I get all worked up about that loss of money for obvious reasons.

**Jason Keist:** That's big. Cause students will, especially when we're talking about adult learners and those who have families. So, you can't be spinning your wheels and spending dollars that are detracting away from life chances of your family. So, these articulation agreements, what I'm kind of hearing, have to be so locked solid and actually follow the steps of the students versus being disconnected in a way so that students kind of fall through in a way, if I'm kind of saying that it.

**Dr. Michael Baston:** It is important because we cannot get locked into articulation agreements that are academics only.

As I do equitable transfer work with other college presidents in four-year systems, it's always about equitable transfer. If you have a Black male initiative at your four-year institution and I have one in my community college, there's no reason why we are not actually affiliating and doing things together now. You have transfer advisors, there's no reason they're not doing transfer advisement at my college if you want my students to be there. If there are affiliated services, my students should have access to the different things on your campus before they go there as an incentive for them to come there so that they are familiar when they actually transfer there.

So, we've got to work together on our financial aid, we got to work together on our advisement, we got to work together on our enrollment processes. If I have all their information and our students sign off on it, why are you asking them to repopulate

your specific application? What are the data transfers that we can engage in together so that it makes it easier for them to transition?

What happens to my students when they come to you? Give me that data so that I can share it with potential students that could come to you so that they know that you receive them, that you care about them, that you are going to ensure their success as much as I am. So, it's a lot of things, particularly when we talk about equitable transfer that we are diversifying in many instances, those four-year institutions that haven't done well with our traditional populations of people of color and adults most specifically.

So, what is it that we have as an expectation? Not just simply that you're going to take my credits, but if there's a price differential, I'm looking for a discount for my students. If there's a payment plans option, I'm looking for that. I don't want to just do academic articulation.

I want to be in articulation conversations, or partnership conversations, and I don't even talk about articulation as much as I talk about partnership. These partnership opportunities can create space and value and support as those students transition into those other institutions. And so, if we are really going to be helping the adult learner navigate the complexities of higher education, it can't just be the complexities of our system.

Where they ultimately will be out of it at a certain point. It's also got to be these other systems that they are going to navigate because that's what we ought to be promising them on the front end if we want them to understand our value proposition.

**Jason Keist:** Right, excellent. We are getting a lot of meat in here. This is a lot, I really appreciate you all. So, I will ask one more question cause it's just good. So, if there's anything you can kind of summarize, if it one thing listeners are coming away from this podcast with, what might it be?

**Dr. Susana Muñoz:** You got to do the work. I mean that change does not happen without a collective movement on your campus and that means that you have to develop a culture of movement. You have to develop a culture that would recognize change, recognizes the transformation that occurs. And you also need to recognize that some of this equity work falls on the shoulders of many people of color on your campuses and in what ways are you compensating them? This can't be service time so what are the ways that you're honoring the time and talent and

gifts of the people that are also leading this work that are outside of their job capacity?

So, I leave you with that just the doing the work and having leadership matters and having a good leader to really ignite, but also value that work in all aspects and facets of a college. It's not just student affairs, it's not just in the pedagogy, it's administrators, it's how you make decisions about budgets, but do the work.

**Jason Keist:** Excellent.

**Dr. Michael Baston:** And I would just add the work can be done. And so, I think that it is important for us to recognize that if we want things to change, we have to change things, and it can be done. We have lived through too much time of observing the problem or pining about the problem, writing up the problem, having symposiums on the problem. And so, I get back to this idea, I'm tired of analyzing the problem. The question is, what will be the catalyzing factors to doing things that actually reimagine who we could be as a people? I love the fact that all around this country, we have so many more people who identify themselves as interracial because it is a sign that there is diversity in the blood that can't be erased. That it's not just a Black and White conversation anymore. And the masses of young people after the killing of George Floyd led us to understand that worldwide, the way things have been, we'll not be able to simply flip the page and move on. The fact is in our country today these great movements have always been led by students.

Whether it was integrating lunch counters at the Woolworth, whether it was marching, all of the things that have happened that have continued to move us forward. It has been the power of education that moved us forward, that urged us forward, that enabled Frederick Douglas to give the narrative of his experience because he was speaking to it.

We have to speak truth to power, we have to envision a desired state of what we want to have as a country, as a world, and we have to catalyze and support it. We can't back away, we can't back down, we know what we need to do and it's not like we are in search of an answer, we have the answers. The question is, do we have the courage of commitment? It's wonderful to make statements, but we need the courage to make commitments.

**Jason Keist:** Excellent. All right. So do the work and the work can be done. That's right. Okay, well I want just to thank both of you for your time. I would love if this

was five parts, just what we're talking about, that would be fantastic. But with action, right?

**Dr. Susana Muñoz:** Right.

**Jason Keist:** So yeah, we'll just end this here and again, thank you so much for your time, thank you.

**Dr. Susana Muñoz:** My pleasure.

**Dr. Michael Baston:** Great to be with you, Jason, and certainly Dr. Muñoz.