

SUPPORTING RACIAL EQUITY IN CAREER AND TECHNICAL EDUCATION IN 2021 AND BEYOND

By Marci Rockey and Osly J. Flores



At the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL), the four pillars of equity-driven change, public engagement, comprehensive P-20 educational pathways, and transformative leadership are encompassed within our mission to facilitate systemic changes that improve educational equity for underserved students.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased national attention to racial justice, OCCRL was engaged in equity work centered on racially minoritized populations. This work has only become more pertinent as the pandemic made existing equity gaps more visible. Moreover, legislators will begin considering initiatives under the Biden administration's American Jobs and American Families plans that engage community colleges as key players toward advancing future educational opportunities by proposing support for tuition-free community college, infrastructure needs, job training, and student completion grants (American Association of Community Colleges, 2021).

As community colleges engage in initiatives to advance equitable opportunities and outcomes, it is critical to be race-conscious. OCCRL is currently supporting several state and national projects that advance the race-consciousness of community college faculty and staff members to support closing opportunity gaps in high-wage, high-demand fields for racially minoritized students. These projects include serving as a collaborative partner of the Urban Institute's CTE Co-Lab, a research partner of the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW)'s project, which advances diversity and equity in aviation maintenance pathways. Another project includes the ongoing support for Illinois community colleges that are reengaging in the biannual comprehensive local-needs assessment (CLNA) process required under Perkins V legislation.

CTE Co-Lab

In the summer of 2020, OCCRL's director, Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher collaborated with institutional leads at the Urban Institute to join in partnership with World Education, Inc., the National Council for Workforce Education, the Instructional Technology Council, and the National Coalition of Advanced Technology Centers to form the CTE Co-Lab funded by the ECMC Foundation. The aim of this collaborative is to assist colleges interested in reducing equity gaps in student outcomes within their for-credit online CTE programming. The efforts of the CTE Co-Lab was informed by a landscape analysis and survey completed by colleges in December 2020 that centered on advancing equity in online CTE programs impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Anderson, Briggs, Spaulding, Zamani-Gallaher, & López, 2021; Briggs, López, & Anderson, 2021).

Twelve public community and technical colleges were selected through a competitive review process to receive training and support enhancing equity-centered approaches to their online teaching and learning in selected credit-bearing CTE programs. The 12 chosen community and technical colleges are located within eight states: Wisconsin, Colorado, New York, California, Louisiana, Illinois, North Carolina, and Kansas. OCCRL developed and delivered two professional development workshops summer 2021 centered on advancing racial equity designed and the call for equity-consciousness for the CTE College Community of Practice (CCP). More than 50 participants from across the 12 institutions attended the two summer workshops. These presentations focused on engaging the 12 participating schools with training information that could help set the foundation for CCP's continuing work around equity. The PD events brought to light the historical and systematic racial equity gaps that have intensified amid parallel crises (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic, racial unrest,

etc.). By differentiating between diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and equality, this dialogue sought to provide level-setting agendas to critically assess barriers and challenges in online CTE programs that impact fostering data-informed, equitable outcomes for racially minoritized students.

As an organization that prides itself in delivering impactful research and practice, our team worked with the Urban Institute leadership team to adapt training deliverables tailored to meet the organizations' and participants' needs. Informed by feedback from our first workshop, the second one incorporated specific requests from the Urban Institute—based on survey responses from the participating community and technical colleges—to center on four frameworks: (1) overarching equity practices, (2) student support and engagement, (3) curriculum design and delivery, and (4) pathways to further education and high-quality employment in the field. This resulted in an engaging workshop that included helping participants build an understanding of equity consciousness, fostering changes in practice, and recognizing equity consciousness as a process with discomfort being characteristic of growing a commitment to becoming more inclusive in language and practice (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2019). Within this supportive space, participants reflected on and responded to critical questions such as:

- How does your understanding of race, racial differences, and racism inform your practice as a CTE educator?
- Can you reflect on an issue of equity within the program your college is focusing on and share how you would frame it to get away from deficit-based thinking to a focus on structural barriers and assets?
- How will your problem statement effectively lead to a better understanding of how institutional processes and practices contribute to equity gaps for students of color?

CSW Aviation Education Pathways

In collaboration with the Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW), OCCRL is studying how to broaden access and participation as well as expand outreach and recruitment for diversifying aviation maintenance programs and skilled trades in community colleges. Throughout the summer, OCCRL staff met with CSW personnel and AAR Corporation, an aviation maintenance workforce development partner that provides global aviation services, to coordinate and plan for the needs of the second project. OCCRL staff will be engaging in leading and conducting a research project that seeks to inform recruitment, teaching, learning, retention, and completion in aviation and skills-related trades programs. To accomplish this, OCCRL is conducting field work interviewing students, staff, and faculty from four Eagle pathway institutional partners identified by the AAR Corporation to obtain empirical data to learn more about the success and challenges in recruiting and retaining more Black, Latinx, and female students into aviation technician careers.

CLNA

With support from the Illinois Community College Board (ICCB), OCCRL researchers previously developed the comprehensive local-needs assessment (CLNA) template for the state's community college system (James-Gallaway et al., 2020). The inaugural completion cycle was disrupted by the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, as institutions experienced uncertainty and sudden changes to learning and working environments. As colleges approach their second cycle of engaging relevant stakeholders in completing the CLNA, it is an opportunity to center what has been learned during the past academic year: The pandemic has only intensified educational and economic inequities for historically underserved populations at the local, state, and national levels. In the context of Illinois higher education, these groups include racially minoritized students, low-income students, working adults, and rural students (Illinois Board of Higher Education, 2021).



As community colleges engage in initiatives to advance equitable opportunities and outcomes, it is critical to be race-conscious.

The CLNA process creates an opportunity to facilitate challenging but necessary conversations that center subpopulations that are experiencing inequity, as well as explore the intersections between them and enact change toward closing equity gaps at the local level (Welton et al., 2019). Prior to the pandemic, there may have been limitations in how institutions thought about delivering CTE programs, and local labor-market needs have undoubtedly experienced significant changes. For those institutions that released statements of support for advancing racial justice, the CLNA provides a platform for translating words into action. OCCRL will be providing continued support and professional development that assists Illinois community colleges in this process geared toward learning and implementing local-level changes that align with state goals centering on educational and workforce equity (Illinois State Board of Education & Illinois Community College Board, 2020).

Closing

Across these three projects, OCCRL has supported educators in advancing race-consciousness and prioritizing racial equity in various contexts. Under the leadership of Dr. Zamani-Gallaher, the team will continue to provide thought-provoking and critical conversations around these topics. In the upcoming academic year, OCCRL researchers and affiliates will be engaging with these various stakeholder groups to guide equity-conscious practice in CTE programs and beyond.

Marci Rocky can be reached at rockey2@illinois.edu.
Osley Flores can be reached at ojflores@illinois.edu.

References

- American Association of Community Colleges. (2021, August 12). [*Tell Congress to enact community college priorities in the American Jobs and Families Plans.*](#)
- Anderson, T., Briggs, A., Spaulding, S., Zamani-Gallaher, E., & López, D. (2021, March). *Racial and ethnic equity gaps in postsecondary career and technical education*. Urban Institute.
- Briggs, A., López, D., & Anderson, T. (2021, May). [*Online career and technical education programs during the pandemic and after.*](#) Urban Institute.
- Flores, O.J. & Gunzenhauser, M. (2019). The problem with colorblind leadership revealed: A call for race-conscious leaders. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 32(8), 963-981.
- Illinois Board of Higher Education. (2021). [*A thriving Illinois: Higher education paths to equity, sustainability, and growth.*](#)
- Illinois State Board of Education & Illinois Community College Board. (2020). [*Illinois state plan for the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act \(Perkins V\).*](#)
- James-Galloway, C., Keist, J. A., & Rockey, M. (2020, Fall). [*Advancing equity in career and technical education in Illinois.*](#) Update. Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Welton, A.D., Rockey, M., & James-Galloway, C. (2019). [*An equity-centered comprehensive local needs assessment.*](#) Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.