



Leading as Myself

California Community College CEO Reflections on Personal and Institutional Growth Across a Year of Racial Reckoning

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LEADERS OF THE CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY COLLEGES have been through a year for which none of them could have anticipated or prepared. While the COVID-19 pandemic forced rapid and dramatic shifts in operational continuity, program delivery and the very culture of work, the May 2020 murder of George Floyd by police required many college CEOs to tap—or develop—the vocabulary, skills and courage to lead urgent, necessary conversations about race and equity at their institutions.

In an effort to document how community college CEOs are evolving as they lead their institutions to respond, Wheelhouse conducted a series of focus group interviews with presidents, superintendent/presidents and chancellors in April 2021. While the pandemic was the overarching context for the 2020-21 academic year, our questions focused squarely on college responses to the nation's racial reckoning. We sought to gather leaders' challenges, successes and lessons from an unexpected year that spurred deep personal growth and a measure of maturity and confidence for many as they developed and used their capacity to identify and battle racism.

Our goal was to capture leadership reflections on the path toward more racially and socially just institutions across the connected spheres of faculty, curriculum, student belonging and performance. Our hope is that the documentation of these reflections can help sustain important conversations and momentum toward equity in service of students of color, who constitute the majority of the nation's largest system of higher education.

TOPLINES

- > More than a year after the murder of George Floyd, California community college CEOs described a generally **increasing sense of confidence and capacity** as they lead conversations and operational changes to make their institutions more equitable and racially just.
- > Many CEOs cited **the importance of mentors, professional development, allies and networks** as they navigate difficult conversations and—at times—face resistance to structural changes they see as necessary for progress.
- > The racial reckoning of the past year has brought a **continuum of institutional responses**, from the adoption of resolutions to more concrete changes in the arenas of hiring, curriculum, teaching, policing and student experience.
- > CEOs said they are **looking for gap closure in student success** as the primary sign that their campuses are becoming more equitable.

“I didn’t know I could be this authentic and raw ... not feeling I need to translate my thoughts or my actions or decisions to make others more comfortable. I still operate strategically and with diplomacy, but I don’t adjust based on others’ discomfort. That was a huge step for me.”

“At some point you are going to have to define whether, when you become a leader, am I White or am I a person of color? You have to really ante up. I decided I am a person of color and I am unapologetic about it.”

“I question myself all the time. Should I have said that, should I have done that? Should I have said something more?”

“Finding My Voice”

Time and again, the CEOs we interviewed spoke openly about their complex, individual journeys to find and use their voice as leaders of conversations and decisions related to race and equity. This search for comfortable tone, appropriate vocabulary, authenticity and moral authority was frequently described as inextricable from CEOs’ own ethnicity and the lenses and life experience they bring to their roles. One leader described his journey to achieve “comfort with discomfort.”

For some CEOs of color, the heightened focus on issues of race gave them opportunity to directly tackle topics and decisions they had been cautious about in the past. “I am more comfortable and less apologetic,” said one, finding a sense of relief in not having to do so much code switching or modulating language for different audiences. “I don’t have to speak in a certain language that you speak in to do what’s right for my students.”

This expression of having found a place of comfort in speaking plainly came less from equity-driven CEOs becoming more confident in their roles and more from a realization that the context had shifted; campus constituents were ready to speak of things unspoken or ignored in the past. Several CEOs had been leading on issues of diversity, equity and inclusion long before “DEI” was a common acronym or campus initiative. The heightened sensitivity and openness of the weeks and months after the Floyd murder meant that more people were listening to and seeking out the lived experiences, fluency and other forms of expertise they had always possessed. One Latinx CEO described the feeling that “the system has caught up with me.”

The degree to which the experience and candor of Black CEOs has influenced their fellow college leaders was plain. Some have been tapped repeatedly to speak to boards of trustees or campus convenings at other institutions. One API CEO had seen and been deeply disturbed by the video of George Floyd’s murder, but said his sense of urgency was fully formed in the moment he heard how much pain the event had caused a fellow CEO, who is Black: “It was very profound for me to see him that up close and personal and his willingness to be vulnerable.”

A number of CEOs acknowledged their awareness of how their own ethnicity—whether similar or different from their campus at large – impacted how they lead and are perceived. A Latinx CEO described his “growth as a person and as a professional” by moving from a mostly white campus to a large Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) where his work on equity could impact the majority of the student body and “where my voice is actually appreciated.” An API CEO recounted how recent violence against Asian Americans had impacted his leadership of a mostly Latinx and White campus that “hadn’t seen the API side of me.”

While these CEOs described the comfort they had achieved in being able to place their own ethnicity at the center of their leadership, others shared a sense of insecurity or of needing to tread carefully. A number of White CEOs interviewed mentioned a new sense of “humility” around the obligation to be more active allies, “to be honest about my privilege and use it for good,” as one put it. Several spoke of their own recognition that, while they have been committed to issues of equity and racial justice for most or all of their careers, they recognize they have not done enough to change student experience on their campuses. These reckonings have spurred deep and sometimes unsettling realizations: “I’ve really had to do a lot of self-reflection on who I am as a human being and how I lead,” said one CEO. Another shared the feeling of being “dumber than ever.” “How do we even have a right to speak?” he asked. “And yet, we have a responsibility to speak.”

One CEO said the past year brought her to the point where she could acknowledge her whiteness aloud: “It took me a very long time to get to the point where [I realized], no one’s blaming me as a person. But I’ve got to come to terms with the fact that this is the time to say that [I am White] ... I needed to stop being defensive.” Another traced his own evolution this way: “I look back at who I was when I was 20 and what I understand now, and it is light years’ difference from where I was to where I am. If that was a journey of 1,000 miles, to get to [expertise] is a journey of 5,000 miles. I don’t have the vocabulary.” A third reflected candidly on his growth curve in leading conversations about race and racism: “A lot of it is trying to figure out what biases I bring ... the unconscious biases ... and are they coming through in what I say? Am I allowed to bring up certain things as a White man and the leader of an institution that feels passionate about that, but has not walked in those shoes and had those lived experiences?”

Still others shared concrete examples of their “pain points” in growing into anti-racist leadership. One Latinx CEO shared a hard but necessary comeuppance when a colleague told him that his post-traumatic-event emails to the campus were inadequate, that he had to not just be empathetic, but communicate what he intended to do to make change: “When something would happen I would send a response. They were fine.... But at one point somebody told me: ‘Stop sending those kinds of emails. They are just about how we feel, the emotion, the atrocity, the horror. Who cares? What is the action, what are we going to do?’ It took me aback. Just being called out really made me think that if I’m going to talk about this I need to not be lazy about it. I need to not just be emotional about it. What am I going to really say?”

Several CEOs described their particular challenge of finding the right tone or balanced language to lead dialogues among campus constituents who might not yet be ready for blunt conversations about race, or who may still doubt the seriousness of structural barriers that burden students of color. There were multiple layers and considerations related to finding leadership voice, but the capacity to show authenticity, and at times vulnerability, were frequent themes struck by CEOs interviewed.

Seeking Allyship and Learning

Beyond their reliance on one another for guidance and mentorship, a number of CEOs directly cited the value of their engagement with key organizations and networks. Several of these networks have deep expertise and track records of work in equity and anti-racism, but over the past year found even greater resonance and reach as players across the CCCs sought virtual platforms for processing the trauma felt after high-profile and violent acts of racism. Organizations such as A2MEND (African American Male Education and Network Development), APAHE (Asian Pacific Americans in Higher Education) and CCColegas (California Community Colleges Organización de Latinx), among others, convened large numbers of diverse participants, at times on weekends, for conferences or presentations that suggested a growing sense of “solidarity and allyship” across race.

These open virtual gatherings created new spaces for leaders to find affinity by ethnicity, affinity across ethnicity and strength in a community of allies. Some also cited opportunities for allyship that extended beyond race to include gender and sexual identity. They also offered CEOs and other campus players the chance to develop vocabulary for their own leadership on issues of social justice and anti-racism and provided exposure to promising developments and practices at other campuses.

“I find myself being even more careful with language, because I can’t allow my passion to overwhelm my college, or just speak to those who already agree with the issues I’m passionate about. I’ve got to figure out better ways to connect to those who are in the middle.”

“When you are not authentic in who you are, [and] you leave a part of yourself at the door, then you are not availing yourself of your full skills and gifts.”

Although not acknowledged explicitly across all focus groups, anti-API hate crimes and issues of xenophobia were cited by many CEOs eager to address these and broader considerations of racism on college campuses.

The pandemic’s influence on these efforts was double edged. While several CEOs named disadvantages in their inability to bring people physically together for conversations they perceived as less effective over Zoom, several also noted unexpected advantages—a “pandemic gift”—of scale and access as webinars, Twitter chats¹ and remote convenings² proliferated and many more staff at varied levels of leadership had access to learning and frank conversations they had not joined in the past. “The system has shrunk,” said one. Not all CEOs felt this was necessarily a positive development, describing a sense that too much focus on topics of race and racism left some campus employees with a sense that they worked for racist institutions, which some CEOs felt was an unfair characterization.

Operationalizing Equity

Even while CEOs were finding or settling into their own leadership voices, many were leading efforts to make campus operations more equitable and racially just. A number of those interviewed cited the use and efficacy of resolutions, mission statements, strategic plans, and education master plans to anchor or concretize campus commitments through goals and objectives for racial diversity among administrators, staff, and faculty, while eliminating equity gaps in student success outcomes. In addition, most CEOs highlighted the importance of distributed leadership and their challenges and successes in expanding beyond “the usual equity champions” or “a coalition of the willing” to energize the momentum for change created by racist violence and the pandemic.

Urgency and Commitment Expressed Through Resolutions

To communicate an institutional sense of urgency and commitment to racial and social justice, CEOs relied on resolutions with messaging that implicitly or explicitly condemned racism while elevating equity and social justice as a destination. Sometimes with the support of their boards of trustees, resolutions allowed campuses to publicly condemn racism. These statements or calls to action also increased public awareness around the relationship between racism, equity gaps in student outcomes, and the disproportionate health and economic impacts experienced by communities of color during the pandemic.

Some CEOs shared struggles to issue official, anti-racist statements when their governing boards expressed discomfort. “I thought we had a great [solidarity] resolution. They [trustees] had this huge debate ... they didn’t like the word social justice ... and ended up taking it out and putting something like ‘fair treatment of all people’....Then they fought for another 30 minutes over including the term ‘Black Lives Matter’ ... and that didn’t end up going in.” The variation in institutional comfort levels with explicit versus implicit condemnations of racism mirrored what a third of CEOs cited in earlier research³, that is, a “basic need for stronger will” or leadership responsibility on the part of themselves, their trustees or other high-level administrators.

Getting Beyond Resolutions

CEOs shared how their campuses pivoted from communications strategies to introducing concrete goals and objectives within strategic plans, education master plans, or student success campaigns linked to accreditation plans. Those we interviewed shared multiple, explicit examples of ways that their institutions transitioned from word to action over the past year. These examples, by no means exhaustive of all important changes statewide, included:



A rural college CEO established and chaired a DEI committee that added a new goal to the campus's five-year education master plan "to address systemic racism and social injustices within all facets of our services and programs." The academic senate was also asked to contribute an equity objective and related activities as part of distributing leadership and ownership of the proposed goals and their implementation.



In an effort to foster a more welcoming environment for students, the police department of a large suburban college changed its core values and mission statement. The CEO recalled that the department asked itself: "Why do we have to wear regular police uniforms when we're on campus? Can we have something that is a little more friendly and communicates a little more approachability toward the students?...I mean, we're armed and we're here to protect them...from something that is happening outside, not to necessarily police." The department is now redesigning its uniforms.



As part of a broader campaign to improve first semester outcome for Black and Latinx students, a mid-sized suburban college added an "equity reflection" statement to faculty evaluations, both for self and peer appraisals. This element was approved by the faculty union at the urging of Black faculty and administrators.



A team at one urban college interviewed faculty members with the lowest drop rates, and the students in their classes, to identify what about these classes students found successful. Their findings informed subsequent professional development and broader campus goals. A similar effort was developed for the College's classified staff to round out a welcoming environment for students across campus.



Multiple CEOs described establishing or expanding faculty academies/work groups to address equity in hiring, curricular changes, and instruction. Topics included implicit bias, culturally sustaining pedagogies, grading practices, and interrogating data on equity gaps in course success.



To build cross-department and cross-function focus and shared understanding of goals among faculty and staff, the CEO of a mid-size suburban college made the choice to shut down operations for two full days so all campus employees could participate in professional development centered on equity.



The new CEO of a mid-size suburban college worked with an external research entity to design a survey to understand (1) faculty and staff perspectives of racism and bias on campus, (2) perceptions of barriers and momentum for institutional change, and (3) views and interest in professional development to help shape potential structural changes in order to translate racial reckoning into action.

“Anything, any committee, that is not led by a member of the executive team has no focus, no outcomes, no real intent. And that is an organizational challenge ... I have a phenomenal executive team. Less than half of my deans are really prepared for their positions and many of them have been in those jobs for a long time, and when you start moving into directors and managers, there’s just no ability to lead.”

Sharing the Work

Most CEOs reported having a subset of staff and faculty who historically had championed equity efforts on campus. They deputized this “coalition of the willing” with responsibility for evolving campus climates and reducing structural barriers to equity. However, these deputies were not always members of the executive leadership or middle management teams, which sometimes resulted in committees or task forces that lacked necessary power or influence to push through the very structural barriers maintaining the status quo.

Variability in distributed leadership capacity across colleges in our sample was profound. One CEO of a large urban college shared his campus’s swift embrace of the state chancellor’s “Call to Action”⁴ and movement from resolutions to formation of campus and academic senate committees to formulate detailed action plans that were supported by the board of trustees. “I’m really proud of that accomplishment,” reflected this CEO, “because it was led by a director. I probably did maybe about an hour’s worth of work on the document, but they did all the work. They took it through the process [with] the constituent groups and they got it pushed through and done...I’m really excited about that because it showed that the work is starting to be infused within the organization.”

By contrast, the CEO of a suburban college recounted slow movement by faculty. “One of the things we’ve seen with our faculty senate is ... it’s all about ... checks and balances, which is process. And the process is in place to maintain the status quo...,” this CEO reflected. “So I lead our DEI. I’m chair of the DEI committee now. It’s been a lot of work. I have to say I really don’t have time to do it. But if I don’t have time to do this, then what do I have time for? Which has made a difference, I think. The Senate is involved, but they are not leading it.”

Some CEOs shared that, in response to managers and executive team members expressing a lack of expertise or comfort in leading tough conversations or imparting expectations to staff and faculty, they initiated professional development to help these players acquire the skills to maneuver within their spheres of influence. One CEO shared the importance of capacity building through special academies where the deans learned data fluency and how to develop equity plans to support “courageous conversations” with faculty about disaggregated data on student outcomes in their courses. Special care was taken to alleviate faculty fears that deans would not use data in a punitive way.

In general, the CEOs who expressed having larger and skilled teams or broader coalitions had begun building more diverse management teams before the pandemic. The pandemic presented these leaders with an opportunity to deepen existing anchors of equity.

Faculty, Curriculum and the Classroom

Across faculty-influenced arenas where CEOs in the past may not have felt they had sufficient agency or influence, a number of the leaders we interviewed expressed a new sense of momentum and provided concrete examples of progress made over the past year. CEOs communicated a clear desire to embed equity across the spheres of curriculum, recruitment and hiring, faculty onboarding, ongoing professional development and training in curricular and pedagogical approaches, and performance evaluation. They described a host of promising efforts their institutions have undertaken to tackle issues of equity and inclusion among faculty, and the passion and momentum that many faculty expressed: “When the Black Lives Matter movement hit and George Floyd hit it was sort

of a wake up call...” Despite such momentum, their optimism was tempered by a sense of caution in enlisting faculty as partners in this work, citing a number of structural barriers, and the broader sentiment that “faculty were guardians of tradition,” not always in the service of students or equity.

Faculty Hiring and Development

Hiring was of primary concern for CEOs as they expressed an urgent need to address the lack of diversity among faculty. “Faculty are the only aspect of the college/system that is still majority White, and particularly instructional faculty [rather than counselors].”

Many CEOs felt constrained by aspects of faculty Senate hiring structures, citing challenges including recruitment preferences from the adjunct pool, parameters on minimum qualifications, the academic senate 10-plus-1⁵ rule, and other barriers—explicit or implicit—that limited diversity in faculty hiring. Nevertheless, many CEOs also noted their own leadership success at pushing for more diversity in faculty ranks, and in ensuring that faculty pools must be diverse in order to move forward: “You have to take every opportunity”; and “when you don’t have the candidate, you don’t hire anybody.” Many cited progress in faculty diversity and its impact, i.e. “more diverse faculty that are now becoming tenured are demanding seats at the table of the academic senate,” or in working within the governance structure, i.e. “I was able to get and have continued to get the support of our district and our shared governance structure ... with our academic senate making this one of their number one priorities to hire a diverse faculty that reflects the student body of the communities that we’re serving.”

Faculty diversity and representation is just one aspect of the equity work needed to address instruction. Most CEOs interviewed cited investments made over the past year in faculty professional development on issues of equity. Some colleges designed comprehensive and mandatory training for all faculty (and classified staff), shutting down offices for full participation in professional development on equity topics. Other CEOs described compensating faculty working groups on equity-focused activities, including visiting and reporting back on innovations from other institutions, reading groups, and faculty inquiry groups to, as one CEO described, “work on humanizing our campus.”

Despite these varied efforts, many CEOs also shared frustration with the lack of engagement on the part of many faculty and, in some campuses, with faculty leadership: “There has to be some leaning in from the deans, at the deans’ level, the instructional teams.” CEOs also pushed on a broader lack of leadership from the senate on equity issues: “So if I looked at the Senate agendas, it just doesn’t show up.” As another CEO stated: “I understand the power of the faculty and the power of the senate, I know how to work with them, but ... trying to get them focused on it ... has been very, very challenging.”

Taking on the Curriculum

CEOs acknowledged the sacred space of curriculum with their faculty. Although many emphasized that curriculum was in the purview of faculty senates and that their hands were somewhat tied, they were nonetheless clear that taking on the curriculum was necessary and expressed a strong willingness to do so. One described his navigation this way: “I have more influence than power.” Several CEOs highlighted efforts to question, encourage, coach, and support faculty efforts to address curricular issues.

“Twenty years ago ... you looked at the requirements for our positions [and] you would see budgeting, building new buildings, enrollments. Equity was no where in sight and ... at our levels ... and below we need to require some sort of knowledge ... If we’re unaware of how to lead with equity or we’re too scared or we don’t know how, we shouldn’t get hired.”

“We can’t hire our way out of this ... [we must] commit and invest in PD of current faculty, impact what they teach, how they teach, and increase understanding of who they teach.”

“People have been bred in [a] White, colonial framework. It’s particularly hard to disrupt that.”

Having once been faculty themselves, several CEOs also cited the hard work of engaging faculty on curricular and pedagogical issues in particular: “Faculty teach how we were taught,” one reflected, and thus the resulting inequalities in student success are unsurprising: “Privilege blinds people.” One CEO pushed harder: “Can the master really dismantle his own house? And 10-plus-1 says the master is the only one with the keys.” CEOs pointed to real progress in some departments, while others lagged behind. “[T]he faculty talk big, but are you going to decolonize the curriculum?” CEOs of color did not let their faculty of color off the hook either: “Whiteness is showing up even among some of our faculty of color.”

Several of the CEOs we interviewed raised the welcome arrival of ethnic studies and described recent successful efforts to introduce and approve new ethnic studies courses on their campuses, as well as plans to hire more faculty in ethnic studies subfields that were poorly represented. However, some CEOs also recognized the potential for the rise of ethnic studies to subvert efforts to decolonize the curriculum. On the one hand, proposed ethnic studies legislation⁶ was a critical tool in recognizing the importance of ethnic studies in students’ curricular experiences, and as core content required for degrees. On the other hand, some CEOs worried that this would sequester cultural relevance in a single discipline and distract from or “pigeonhole” needed equity efforts to address a broader “lack of representation of people of color and women in all aspects of the curriculum.”

Some CEOs described efforts at more comprehensive curricular reforms, including a curriculum equity task force, board approved DEI degree requirements, an equity and anti-racism lens on new course approvals, the requirement for every course to have a student learning outcome on equity practice, and integrating culturally relevant material in the classroom.

Equity in the Classroom

Beyond the curriculum, CEOs were clear that eliminating equity gaps in course success would require faculty to address pedagogy and instruction more generally. They described this in a variety of ways: creating a more inclusive classroom climate, combatting deficit mindsets and “antiquated thinking” and addressing grading and assessment policies. Many discussed the need to improve students’ sense of belonging, particularly those from marginalized groups, for faculty to take a more active interest in students and to understand their histories, their aspirations and their lives. One CEO articulated the need for such humanity, now more than ever amidst the pandemic, showing empathy when cameras need to be off, or when students may be challenged by chaotic home environments. CEOs offered a variety of promising approaches they had witnessed at their own campuses and elsewhere, including: engaging students more intentionally in the classroom; initiating individual meetings with every student; sending a welcoming video from the instructor before class; and utilizing first year experience courses and learning communities.

Several CEOs were engaging in data-use efforts to have faculty review disaggregated course-level data and discuss strategies to close racial and other performance gaps. A handful of colleges were piloting a novel tool for faculty to solicit regular and anonymous feedback from students on their experience in the course along several dimensions (e.g., identity safety, belonging, and learning mindsets). The tool also directed faculty to a library of resources on how to create a more inclusive learning environment.

Finally, one CEO described a broader campus effort to identify and spread the strategies used by the faculty who had the lowest drop rates in their courses. Lessons from students enrolled in those courses led to adoption of a campus-wide approach for all faculty that emphasized these elements:

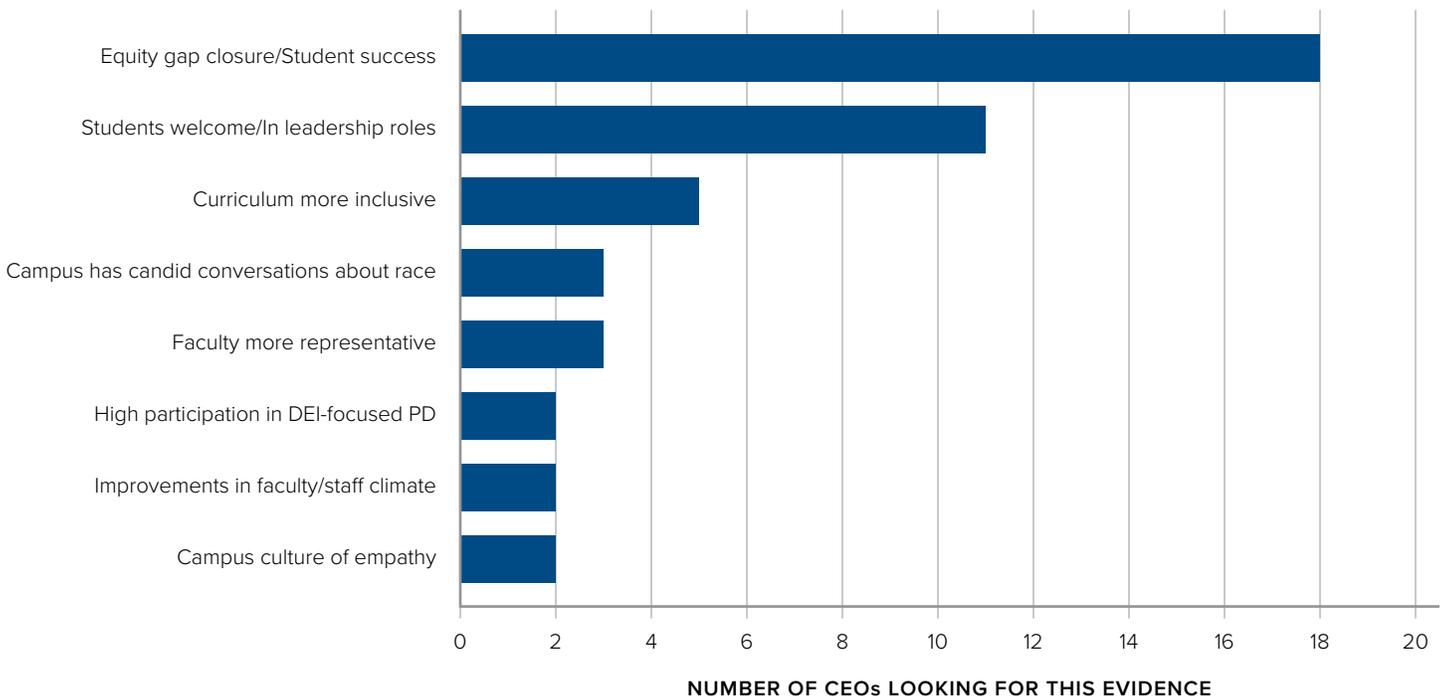
1. Forming personal connections with students (i.e., knowing your students' names).
2. Making class material more relatable to students and to their lives.
3. Setting clear expectations of students, while remaining flexible when needed.
4. Communicating with students—early and often.

“I want to hear African American students say, ‘I want to go to that school because they get it ... they’re walking the talk.’”

What Evidence Are Ceos Looking For?

Most of the CEOs interviewed articulated a clear vision for evidence indicating their campuses are becoming more equitable and welcoming. Figure 1 shows strong alignment among leaders looking for signs that success gaps are closing across broad metrics of student success – some in this category mentioned persistence, completion, early academic success, full-time enrollment or some combination of those. A number of CEOs also placed high value on evidence that students of color feel the campus is “where I want to spend my time,” when “they are walking around like they own the place” and when a more racially representative group of students takes on leadership roles, e.g. “when my student leadership group is Latinx.”

Figure 1. What evidence would suggest your campus was becoming more equitable?



Note: Most CEOs cited more than one kind of desired evidence. Several CEOs identified other kinds of evidence; these, not included in the figure due to their singular nature, included enrollment expansion; more BIPOC students entering science, technology, engineering, arts and math fields; students focused on entrepreneurship; campus accountability for actions to back up resolutions; admission that “we have a racial problem” on campus; reduction of racial tension; expansion of the “coalition of the willing;” greater prevalence of allies; and a student body that reflects the demographic makeup of the community.

“The greatest danger we face, from which all of the problems we’re talking about stem, is our inability to reason with each other any longer, the disintegration of a common pact in the US. I think we could better address ... racism and social justice ... if we find a way to reason with each other. If we don’t, all of this is going to be academic.”

“As long as students of color are still lagging behind, we have not done the work. Everything else is just talk ... We need to move from the good conversations, the conversations on diversification and having equity lenses, to actually having results that impact the lives of ... students of color. So when we close these gaps and those results are consistent, that day I will say our job is done.”

A number of CEOs also mentioned connected factors at the heart of instruction and student learning: faculty and curriculum. They spoke of their push to see a more inclusive curriculum that would benefit students of color, an effort to “equitize the syllabus,” in the words of one. Said another: We need “a serious look at curriculum by faculty to move away from Eurocentric content to more of a worldview.” Several also spoke of their goal of seeing the diversity of their faculty come closer to the makeup of their student bodies. One emphasized the importance not just of hiring diverse instructors, but ensuring they retain those that are already part of the faculty.

Still others cited the desire for their campuses to become environments where students, staff and faculty have “freedom to hold conversations ... about racial injustice,” or where “mindfulness” is the norm, and people on campus “understand implicit bias and can talk about it openly, [resulting] in a sustained change in behavior.” Two CEOs mentioned that current measures of success for community colleges are inadequate to the full spectrum of developmental achievements they see as needed for students, citing a need for “new markers” to identify improvements in capacity among campus constituents for empathy and community.

It is worth noting that several CEOs identified the elimination of gaps in student success as the only sign that would convince them of significant progress. They shared their belief, as one put it, that this was the “proof in the pudding” that would indicate that many of the other elements called out by their colleagues—campus climate, curriculum and classroom experience—had succeeded in contributing to the bottom line on equity. Said another: “I’m clear. Unless we move the needle, all of [the rest] is for naught.”

Growth and Learning for Leadership Capacity

Several CEOs reflected on their prior lack of preparedness for the demands of their current roles, saying they now considered their education outdated and were learning while doing. They also wanted a structured “community of peers” with whom they can reveal vulnerability or uncertainty in ways they cannot with their cabinets, boards of trustees or chancellors. Several cited the need for low-stakes opportunities to practice language or talk through potential decisions on sensitive topics. Others named the need for CEOs to develop skills for advocacy or activism and to be comfortable with its tools, such as effective use of social media and cultivation of relationships with state or federal legislators. Several called for periodic reprieves from “the space of operational issues” and for more self-care, which included tending to their own growth as professionals and having peer circles in which they can find emotional support, informal mentorship and equity-minded leadership models to incorporate in their own practice.

There was a broad sense that the requirements of the job and the expectations for aspiring CEOs have changed significantly with the rise of more direct dialogues and focus on race and equity. “When you interviewed,” one recalled, “[equity] was a single question. Now it is the majority of the focus and interest.” Another noted that, in years past, “you could flow through these institutions and not do anything distinctive with regard to equity.” Not anymore.

“A Movement, Not a Moment”

A number of CEOs interviewed expressed optimism, asserting their hopes and resolve to sustain this past year’s momentum—this “renaissance of consciousness”—toward more just and equitable colleges. Some were able to point to major shifts in attitudes—“before, something was wrong with the students; now, something is wrong with the institution”—and structural changes that may bring lasting equity gains. They cited a relatively new and more equitable state funding formula, recent legislation requiring credit-bearing course placements for students formerly placed in developmental education, changes in campus policing and police training, curricular changes and greater diversity in hiring in many institutions. Several also cited the growing understanding that the basic needs of low-income students—food, housing, childcare, mental health—must be met for them to have true college opportunity and success.

A few expressed concern that fatigue or a reverse swing of the pendulum might stall progress or inspire the kind of individual or institutional backlash that often follows movements for significant societal change. But these college leaders conveyed a broad sense that the national outrage at the murder of George Floyd and violence against other Americans of color had inspired what could become—under capable and courageous leadership—a permanent groundshift for society and for colleges that are positioned to accelerate progress. As one CEO put it, there was hope for “a movement, not a moment” toward just, equitable institutions that embody their full potential. “CEOs don’t have the luxury of pessimism,” this leader said. “We have to lean in, unapologetically, and lead our institutions.”

“This is why I got into this work ... I am inspired, awed and frightened by what lies ahead. Inspired because I see this as an opportunity to accelerate the conversations I have dedicated my life to. I’m empowered by this moment. I’m not foolish about it, I’m calculated. I know not everybody is at the same place. My own ignorance gets in the way at times. I’m in awe that we’re having this large conversation. But I’m frightened, because this needs to be a movement, not a moment, of reckoning.”

DATA AND METHODS

In late March 2021, Wheelhouse sought to capture community college leadership and institutional responses to the deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police, and to a re-emergence of anti-Asian sentiments and hate crimes during the pandemic. As a follow up to our 2020 brief, [Toward a More Perfect Institution](#), we sought an update on how community college CEOs in our network were translating racial reckoning into action, and to document how they and their campuses were advancing equity.

We held seven focus groups with a total of 21 CEOs. When possible, focus groups were organized in gender and/or race-based affinity groupings (e.g., Black male CEOs, Women CEOs, Latinx male CEOs, White male CEOs, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI)) to allow for more candid conversations about CEOs’ own identity in this work. Focus group transcripts were coded and evaluated independently by the authors to arrive at a set of thematic findings. We share these leaders’ reflections in their own words to the fullest extent possible, with quotes taken directly from de-identified focus group recordings. While we cannot assume that our findings are representative of the full population of community college CEOs in California or the nation, our sample allowed us to capture a spectrum of thought and ideas from a diverse set of CEOs (race, age, years of experience, gender, and sexual orientation) who serve a diverse array of campuses statewide (rural, urban, large, small, minority-serving and predominately white, in more affluent and lower income communities).

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Director and Research Professor, Community College Research Center

Larry Galizio
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Brice W. Harris
Chancellor Emeritus, California Community Colleges

Douglas B. Houston
Interim Chancellor, State Center Community College District

Harold Levine
Dean Emeritus, UC Davis School of Education

Lauren Lindstrom
Dean, UC Davis School of Education

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Endnotes

- ¹ See #EquityAvengers at <https://twitter.com/equityavengers>, monthly conversations with equity leaders, hosted by Compton College President/CEO Keith Curry (@iamkeithcurry) and San Diego Mesa College President Pamela Luster (@SDMesaPrez).
- ² See for example, Black Student Success Week, sponsored by the California Community College Chancellor's Office in partnership with a number of organizations cited in this section, among others.
- ³ Bush, Cooper, Kurlaender, Rodriguez, and Ramos (2020). Toward a More Perfect Institution. Wheelhouse: The Center for Community College Leadership and Research, UC Davis. See page 5: https://education.ucdavis.edu/sites/main/files/ucdavis_wheelhouse_research_brief_vol5no3_final_0.pdf
- ⁴ In June 2020, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office issued a "Call to Action" urging all 116 colleges to mobilize, develop work plans and hold each other accountable around six key areas to address structural racism across the system. While a number of CEOs in our sample described feeling empowered by the Call to Action, a few expressed unease with the presumption that they needed system guidance to tackle racism and said they perceived it as not helpful. See the Call to Action here: <https://www.cccco.edu/-/media/CCCCO-Website/Files/Communications/dear-california-community-colleges-family>
- ⁵ Title 5 § 53200 of the California Education Code outlines the primary function of the academic senate as an organization that makes recommendations "with respect to 10-plus-1 academic and professional matters." See: https://www.asccc.org/10_1
- ⁶ Assembly Bill 1040 of 2021 would require each community college district to offer courses in ethnic studies at each of its campuses. See: https://leginfo.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=20210220AB1040