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Exploring the Relationship Between Guided Pathways Implementation and Advancing Racial

Equity at California Community Colleges

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requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Anthony Peter Cuomo

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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Doctor of Education

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community college (CCC) System, every college is implementing Guided Pathways, and the

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organize and align all initiatives focused on improving equity and student success (California

Community College Chancellor's Office [CCCCO, n.d.b). Yet, CCCs continue to face

challenges achieving equitable outcomes for all students even while implementing Guided

Pathways (CCCCO, 2021). Because Guided Pathways is a relatively new framework, few studies

have examined its implementation at California Community Colleges with a specific focus on

racial equity from a qualitative perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the

implementation of Guided Pathways at two California Community Colleges. This multi-site case study examined how the Educational Master Plan, Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) plan, Scale of Adoption Assessment (SOAA), and Guided Pathways Workplan contributed to local Guided Pathways implementation, including the equity related activities that colleges prioritized to implement and the perceptions of these activities on achieving racially equitable outcomes. In addition, this study sought to identify any challenges to the successful implementation of the Guided Pathways framework to close racial equity gaps. Findings from this study suggest that both cases focused on responding to a call for change, creating Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs) and mapping CAPs while implementing pillar two. Pillar two activities included developing Student Success and Completion Teams and expanding best practices from affinity programs. Participants at both cases expressed diverse perspectives on Guided Pathways and racial equity. Participants made sense of racial equity as a process, outcome and expressed concerns about using racial equity as lip service. Challenges included funding, leadership dynamics, and silos. Findings from this study suggest that to advance racial equity while implementing Guided Pathways, colleges should center racial equity in implementation, adopt an anti-racist framework, and continue to build capacity to work towards racially equitable student outcomes.

The dissertation of Anthony Peter Cuomo is approved.

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2024

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to C.R.S. I promise to pay it forward.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: THE PROBLEM

Introduction

Guided Pathways is a systemic reform movement focused on increasing community college completion rates and student achievement (Bailey et al., 2015a). Within the California Community College (CCC) System, every college is implementing Guided Pathways, and the California Community College Chancellor's Office (CCCCO) continues to use this framework to organize and align all initiatives focused on improving equity and student success (California Community College Chancellor's Office [CCCCO, n.d.b). Yet, CCCs continue to face challenges achieving equitable outcomes for all students even while implementing Guided Pathways (CCCCO, 2021). Because Guided Pathways is a relatively new framework, few studies have examined its implementation at California Community Colleges with a specific focus on racial equity from a qualitative perspective. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the implementation of Guided Pathways at two California Community Colleges. This multi-site case study examines how the Educational Master Plan, Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) plan, and Scale of Adoption Assessment (SOAA) Guided Pathways Workplan contribute to local Guided Pathways implementation, including the equity related activities that colleges prioritize to implement and the perceptions of these activities on achieving racially equitable outcomes. In addition, this study seeks to identify any challenges to the successful implementation of the Guided Pathways framework to close racial equity gaps.

Background

The California Community College (CCC) system consists of 116 community colleges serving 2.4 million students (California Community Colleges [CCC], 2022). The mission of the system is to provide students with the education and experience necessary to compete in today's economy. CCCs are the nation's largest provider of workforce training. Furthermore, given CCCs open-access nature, the system is at the forefront of combating income inequality and social and economic mobility (CCCCO, n.d.h). While CCCs play an important role in addressing inequality, the system still faces low student completion rates (Bailey et al., 2015b). Only 13% of first-time community college students graduate with an associate degree after two years, and only 31% do so within three (Johnson et al., 2019). In addition, inequitable outcomes persist (Ching et al., 2020). Overall, student six-year completion rates (earning a certificate, degree, or transfer within six years of initial enrollment) are lower among African American students (23%), American Indian/Alaskan students (22%), Hispanic students (22%), and Pacific Islander students (21%), compared to Asian students (47%), Filipino students (34%), and white students (35%) (CCCCO, 2022). While CCCs enroll the majority of Black and Latinx students in California higher education, this enrollment has not resulted in equitable completion rates.

Structural barriers, such as ambiguous program requirements, disconnected courses, difficulty accessing advising services, and lengthy developmental education sequences that disproportionately enroll students of color and those from low-income households, contribute to the low completion rates at many community colleges. While numerous factors are at play, including students' life circumstances, two of the most important causes determining whether a student completes a certificate, degree, or transfer are (a) how early in their community college

career students identify a goal and (b) how long it takes to complete their goal (Bailey, 2018). Furthermore, community college students have fewer outside resources to assist them in navigating college compared to students at four-year universities (Bailey, 2018). These factors have put pressure on community colleges to transform how they serve students, especially students of color, to increase completion.

Addressing Low Completion Rates

In 2017, the California Community Colleges Board of Governors adopted the *Vision for Success* focused on improving student outcomes, increasing the attainment of degrees and certificates, expanding transfers to four-year universities, which reduces the accumulation of extra units, and helping students secure employment (CCCCO, n.d.b). The purpose of this document was to clarify the challenges and opportunities faced by CCCs and simplify educational pathways to help students stay on their paths and complete (CCCCO, n.d.b). Specifically, the *Vision for Success* called on colleges to accomplish the following goals by 2022:

> (1) increase by at least 20% the number of CCC students annually who acquire associates degrees, credentials, certificates, or specific skill sets that prepare them for an in-demand job; (2) Increase by 35% the number of CCC students [system-wide] transferring annually to a UC or CSU; (3) Decrease the average number of units accumulated by CCC students earning associate's degrees, from approximately 87 total units (the most recent system-wide average) to 79 total units—the average among the quintile of colleges showing the strongest performance on this measure; (4) Increase the percent of exiting [Career Technical Education] (CTE) students who report being employed in their field of

study; (5) Reduce equity gaps [and]; (6) Reduce regional achievement gaps. (CCC, 2021, p. 2)

Concerning goal 5, the *Vision for Success* initially set the goals of cutting equity disparities in all the measures mentioned above by 40% by 2022 and completely closing those gaps by 2027 (these dates have since been pushed back five years, as will be explained below). The *Vision* stated that to reach the ambitious systemwide goals, every college should align their objectives to the systemwide priorities.

Simultaneously, several initiatives are being implemented to support the goals in the *Vision for Success,* including AB 705, a new Student-Centered Funding Formula, the Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) plan, and Guided Pathways. The Guided Pathways framework includes four pillars: "(1) Clarify the Path: Mapping Pathways to Student End Goals; (2) Enter the Path: Helping Students Choose and Enter a Program Pathway; (3) Stay on the Path: Keeping Students on the Path; and (4) Ensure Learning: Ensuring that Students Are Learning" (Lahr, 2018, para. 2). By restructuring the student journey to follow an educational pathway with more strategic onboarding, holistic support, and high-impact teaching and learning practices, colleges implementing pathways are working toward transforming how they serve students to increase student success, equity, and completion (CCCCO, n.d.e). Because Guided Pathways is a relatively new framework, few empirical studies measure what colleges have been able to accomplish in relation to the benchmarks set by *Vision for Success* and how progress towards achieving these benchmarks is perceived by faculty, staff, administrators, and students, especially within the context of achieving racial equity. However, there is research on early adaptors across the country and components of pathways, such as student onboarding, creating educational pathways, and various levels of student support programs.

Vision for Success: Implementation Challenges

In 2017, all 116 California Community Colleges (CCC) received funding to begin implementing all components of the holistic Guided Pathways framework. While many colleges have implemented components of Guided Pathways, and some have made significant progress, there is still considerable work to be done. At the state level, the CCCCO plans to use Guided Pathways as an organizing framework to align and direct all initiatives aimed at improving student success and achieving the goals in the *Vision for Success*. The $150 million one-time state investment over five years incentivized colleges to begin this work and combine other existing funds in a coordinated approach to initiate systemic change (CCCCO, n.d.b). In addition to the initial funding, the Chancellor's Office and partners are providing support to help colleges identify friction points in student journeys. System-wide efforts to support colleges include regional Guided Pathways coordinators, professional development, and virtual programming. Despite these resources, colleges continue to face formidable challenges in initiating systemic change.

Since the *Vision's* inception, CCC students have faced additional traumas, including a global pandemic, financial insecurity, a nationwide reckoning with institutional and systemic racism, and political division fueled by misinformation during a divisive presidential election (CCCC, 2021). During the fifth year of implementation, the CCCCO (2021) presented the *Update to the Vision for Success: Reaffirming Equity in a Time of Recovery*. The purpose of the updated vision was to reaffirm the goals and commitments of the CCCCO, considering the current context and articulate how CCCs will support California's economic and social recovery. The CCCCO extended the *Vision for Success* timeline by five years—aiming to reach the original vision's five-year goals by 2027 and its 10-year goals by 2032.

Vision 2030

Building on the foundation of the *Vision for Success* (2017) and the *Update to the Vision for Success: Reaffirming Equity in a Time of Recovery* (2021), *Vision 2030* (2023) was launched by the CCCCO with the introduction to a new CCCCO Chancellor. *Vision 2030* emphasizes equitable access, support, and success while focusing on socio-economic mobility for historically underserved communities. The plan aims to proactively reach out to students, rather than waiting for them to come to college campuses. Strategies include expanding dual-enrollment programs for high school students, offering credit for prior learning to veterans and working adults, partnering with community-based organizations for workforce training, and providing flexible instruction through various modalities such as short-term and online classes. *Vision 2030* not only targets increasing attainment among existing community college students but also prioritizes postsecondary education for the millions of Californians aged 25 to 54 with a high school diploma but no further credentials. It underscores a learner-centered equity approach. Goal 1 of *Vision 2023* is "equity in student success."

Vision 2030 differs from the *Vision for Success* in that it's designed as a dynamic document, allowing the California Community Colleges to adapt systems and infrastructure to meet goals and respond to feedback and evolving needs. While many metrics are already tracked, the methods for assessing these indicators will be reviewed in collaboration with stakeholders to enhance accountability and continuous improvement efforts. These metrics will be integrated into existing dashboards, supporting various aspects of accountability, improvement, planning, and innovation, including initiatives like Student Equity Plans, Guided Pathways, and the Strong Workforce Program. As colleges continue to implement Guided Pathways in the context of the newly constructed vision, they report their progress to the CCCCO annually. In addition,

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colleges are implementing other equity related initiatives that support the Guided Pathways Framework, including AB 705.

Assembly Bill 705

In 2017, Assembly Bill (AB) 705 was passed by the California state legislature to increase the number of students who complete transfer-level English and math within their first year of attendance (California Acceleration Project, 2021). It required that colleges drastically reduce the number of students placed in remedial classes. Before AB 705, community colleges placed many students into remedial courses. Rather than increasing student completion rates, a significant amount of students would never complete credit courses because the remedial sequences were often too long and created additional barriers for student success (Bailey et al., 2015b). Research suggests that more students ultimately complete transfer-level English and math courses if they directly enroll in transfer-level courses rather than beginning in remedial courses (Mejia et al., 2020). This law established an "equitable placement and support process," requiring that variables including past course performance—which research says are better indicators of academic progress and are less likely to lead to remedial placement—determine a student's academic placement and grades (CCCCO, n.d.c). The CCCCO views AB 705 as essential to achieving their equity goals. For years, Black, Latinx and Indigenous students have been disproportionally placed in remedial English and math classes. Research regarding student placement in math and English classes shows that low-income students and students of color are more likely to be placed in remedial courses than other students (CCCCO, n.d.c). Melguizo et al. (2021) argue that AB 705 employs the power of policy as a means for achieving racial justice.

For generations, racially minoritized students' placement in non-transferable courses has blocked their ability to earn college degrees that provide access to well-paying jobs and

increased opportunities for social and economic mobility (Allen, 2020). By requiring equitable placement and support processes to maximize placement into transfer-level courses, colleges strive to remove barriers that have led to low English and math completion rates. Despite the implementation of AB 705, most colleges continue to enroll students in remedial courses. Although fewer students were enrolled in these courses, a significant portion still did not transition to transfer-level courses. Thus, most colleges were not compliant with the policy, which lead to the creation of AB 1705 (CCCCO, 2018). As of fall 2021, only seven of 116 CCCs followed AB 705 guidelines, and most colleges continued to regularly place students in remedial coursework (California Acceleration Project, 2022). Black and Latinx students disproportionately attend colleges that continue to place students in remedial classes. For example, colleges serving more than 2,000 Black students are twice as likely to offer non-credit math classes than colleges with fewer Black students (California Acceleration Project, 2021). While AB 705 was intended to address equity gaps, if the policy does not explicitly address concerns around racial equity, students of color will continue to face gaps in achievement. The state of California recognized this concern. Therefore, AB 1705 was signed into law in 2022 and now prevents colleges from offering any remedial courses (AB-1705 Seymour-Campbell Student Success Act of 2012, 2022).

Student-Centered Funding Formula and Student Equity and Achievement Plan

Another recent reform was the establishment in 2018 of the Student-Centered Funding Formula, which represented a new method of funding community college districts in the state budget. In addition to a portion of district funds being based on student enrollment, the SCFF supports the CCCCO's equity and *Vision 2030* goals by directing funds to community college districts serving low-income students and provides additional funding based on student

completion rates (CCCCO, n.d.d). The SCFF requires all districts to adopt performance goals and ultimately align district budgets to those goals. The 2017 *Vision for Success* inspired the SCFF and supports the alignment of spending to goals focused on student equity and success. To help colleges reach their equity goals, each college also submits a Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) plan to the CCCCO to receive state funds to support their efforts.

The SEA program was established in 1993 by the Board of Governors of the California Community Colleges as a means of addressing equity issues affecting the system's underrepresented students, who at the time were identified as cis-gender females, students of color, and those with disabilities. The SEA plan is intended to support equal educational opportunities and promote student success, regardless of race, disability, economic circumstance, age, or gender. Utilizing guidelines from the CCCCO, each college develops an SEA plan by evaluating its data and making data-driven decisions on how to implement programs and services to reach its equity goals. Colleges must identify and calculate their disproportionately impacted (DI) student populations and articulate initiatives and strategies to meet these goals to improve access, retention, math and English completion, and transfer through academic and student support services across campus (CCCCO, n.d.f). To receive SEA funding, colleges must (a) maintain a SEA plan to "ensure equal educational opportunities and to promote student success for all students," and traditionally underrepresented groups in particular; (b) provide services "needed to assist a student in making informed decisions about their educational goals and course of study and in developing an education plan"; and (c) implement activities and practices according to the California Community College Guided Pathways Grant Program (CCCCO, n.d.f., p.18). AB 705, AB 1705, the SEA plan, and the SCFF are all being carried out during Guided Pathways implementation to increase student completion and reduce equity gaps.

While colleges are required to submit a SEA plan, research has examined if and how SEA planning supports positive institutional change. Felix (2021) conducted an instrumental case study examining the implementation of a community college's SEA plan and found several limitations that impacted the institution's ability to implement change, including a discrepancy between those who planned and those who implemented. Planners failed to consider the context of preexisting campus infrastructure, institutional practices, and bureaucratic organizational routines that may constrain the implementation process of the new strategies they were proposing. As Guided Pathways continues to be scaled across various areas, research suggests that the individuals charged with implementation should also be involved during the planning stages. Furthermore, Felix (2021) calls for institutions to actively seek and identify reform leaders who are more equity-oriented and possess the skills necessary to lead conversations around race and racial disparities. As colleges navigate these legislative mandates, they are required to report their progress toward meeting SEA plan goals to the CCCCO annually to receive state funds to support implementation.

Defining Equity

While California community colleges continue to provide open access to students, the entire system continues to see inequitable outcomes. To better understand how to achieve greater student equity especially in the context of student completion, there needs to be a clear definition of what equity means in the context of Guided Pathways. According to the California Code of Regulations, student equity is defined as "helping students achieve equal outcomes on success indicators as compared to either their own percentage in the community or college student body, or to other student groups" (California Code of Regulations 54220, Student Equity Plans). Essentially, this definition articulates that students should be able to reach their academic goals

without their identity markers being an indicator of their ability to be successful. The state of California evaluates student equity based on several success indicators including access, course completion, ESL and Basic Skill English and Math Completion, Degree and Certificate Completion and Transfer (California Code of Regulations 54220, Student Equity Plans). While California stands out for being the only state to implement a student equity policy and requires a mandated plan to address equity at each community college, the relationship between the student equity plan and Guided Pathways implementation varies across the state (CCCCO, n.d.g).

Assessing Equity within Guided Pathways Implementation

An updated Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) program was established in 2018 by merging funding from three CCCCO initiatives: The Student Success Support Program, the Basic Skills Initiative, and Student Equity. The updated SEA program requires colleges to implement the Guided Pathways framework and maintain an SEA plan. Equity plans focus on boosting achievement as measured by specific "success indicators," including access, course completion, ESL and basic skills completion, degrees and certificates awarded, and transfer rates, and require each college to develop detailed goals and measures addressing disparities across these indicators. However, equity planning at individual community colleges is not always aligned with Guided Pathways work because there is no clear guidance from the CCCCO.

In Fall 2019, the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) passed a resolution to encourage local academic senates to participate in the annual report on the SEA Program and the assessment of how SEA program-funded activities contribute to local Guided Pathways implementation. While the SEA plan and the Guided Pathways framework supports the CCCCO's vision for equity and other equity related initiatives, the Scale of Adoption Assessment (SOAA), further explained below, does not evaluate implementation from an equity

lens. Rather, it provides considerations for discussion. Furthermore, the CCCCO does not have an explicit tool to evaluate how colleges might assess equity during Guided Pathways implementation.

Evaluating Progress: Guided Pathways Scale of Adoption Assessment

In Spring 2019, the CCCCO adopted the SOAA, an assessment tool designed by the Community College Research Center (CCRC) to help stakeholders evaluate and assess how colleges are adopting high-impact, evidence-based practices identified by Bailey et al. (2015b). The SOAA tool assesses 19 essential practices related to the four pillars of Guided Pathways. There are 3-5 essential practices under each pillar. For each essential practice, colleges report on the scale of adoption, including their current progress, and identify the next steps they are taking to move each practice to scale (Lahr, 2018). The scale of adoption consists of a 5-point scale including "1) not occurring, 2) not systematic, 3) planning to scale 4) scaling in progress and 5) at scale" (Schanker & Orians, 2018, p. 3).

The purpose of the SOAA is to report campus-wide conversations about past accomplishments and long-term planning regarding their Guided Pathways implementation. The SOAA is a required element of Guided Pathways funding and is submitted annually by every CCC. The Chancellor's Office plans to use it to aggregate state-wide progress, and colleges are not sanctioned by the Chancellor's Office for missed goals. College participation is an opportunity to reflect on the current implementation status. However, how colleges engage with the SOAA before, during, and after submission depends on the culture and capacity of the institution. Two individuals are required to approve the college's SOAA: the College's academic senate president and the college resident. Other individuals contributing to the report vary by college. The CCCCO encourages each college's shared governance structure to participate in the

process (CCCCO, 2020). The 2021-2022 academic year marked the last year of the first round of pathways funding in California, and researchers have not yet evaluated the SOAA's submitted by CCCs despite colleges being required to submit it annually.

While policy makers assume equity is inherent in much of the Guided Pathways framework, there is lack of guidance on how to address equity gaps during implementation. Bailey et al. (2015b) synthesized findings from the Community College Research Center (CCRC) over eight years and articulated that to increase student completion, community colleges must engage in redesign and articulate how the Guided Pathways framework can be used to achieve greater student success. Yet, while their findings may implicitly argue that increasing student success will increase student equity, their arguments do not centralize racial equity within the Guided Pathways framework. Furthermore, Bragg et al. (2019) argued that early explanations of the pathways model do not address inequities for racially minoritized student groups, nor do they describe how pathways could resolve racial inequities. In fact, the first version of the SOAA did not include equity considerations at all. However, in fall 2019, shortly after the first submissions, the SOAA was updated to include, "Equity Considerations," in each practice area to make connections between the college's pathways reforms and equity goals. While these equity considerations may support additional conversations about how Guided Pathways practices are impacting underserved student groups, a more in-depth analysis is necessary to better understand how colleges can leverage Guided Pathways to close equity gaps. Unless reforms explicitly identify how they will address racial disparities in student outcomes and undo structural racism that contributes to these disparities, equity gaps are unlikely to close (Bensimon, 2017).

Guided Pathways has the potential to act as an "anti-racist policy," a termed coined by Kendi (2019) to describe policy that "produces and sustains racial equity" (p. 18). However, practitioners may not understand how to use Guided Pathways implementation and supporting plans and assessment tools, such as the SEA plan and SOAA, for achieving racial equity and eliminating structural racism within their institutions. Guided Pathways, as a mandated framework to receive equity funding, can be viewed as a policy tool for racial equity due to its focus on transforming all aspects of the college to serve students better. Yet, too often, top-down policies aimed at dismantling racial inequalities can perpetuate the status quo (Chase et al., 2020). Therefore, Guided Pathways may only serve as a tool for racial equity and social justice if implemented specifically and intentionally to centralize racial inequity. While achieving racial equity is a system-wide goal, individual colleges are aligning their specific goals with the CCCCO to achieve the *Vison for Success*. Examining how Guided Pathways implementers are participating in inquiry, design, and implementation of the framework is important to understand the challenges they may face and their experiences and perceptions of how implementation is achieving the racial equity goals established by the CCCCO and the college as articulated in the SEA plan, SOAA, and major planning documents, such as a college's educational master plan. Yet, no studies have examined implementation from a racial equity perspective.

Gap in the Research

As Guided Pathways continues to be implemented, there is a gap in research examining how it supports racial equity and the CCCCO's *Vision 2030*. Prior studies of Guided Pathway have examined early adopters (Jenkins et al., 2021); the use of the SOAA to assess implementation (Lahr, 2018); college presidents' and academic senate presidents' challenges in Guided Pathways implementation (Bailey-Hofmann, 2019); alignment of organizational change

strategies and organizational culture (Archibald, 2021); and perspectives from students, counselors, and instructional faculty (Zimmerman-Cooper, 2021). However, no research has focused on identifying the specific undertakings that colleges are pursuing to advance racial equity while implementing Guided Pathways or what challenges faculty and administrators are facing while focusing on these activities.

The first round of pathways funding was allocated and expired in the 2021-2022 academic year, so as more funding becomes available, colleges need the opportunity to reflect on their progress and address any challenges or barriers to achieving the updated CCCCO's *Vision 2030* to increase student success and equity. Bailey (2018) contends that it is crucial to recognize that achieving equity is a continuous process, especially if colleges focus on achieving equity in outcomes. Moreover, aside from specific activities that are focused on pathways implementation, achieving equitable outcomes also involves changes in attitudes, behaviors, and practices. Since there are various levels of implementation and progress centering many different pathways-related activities, focusing on one community college district can give researchers and practitioners insight into how the implementation is occurring at the local level, rather than making assumptions about the entire system. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine how two California Community Colleges are implementing Guided Pathways to increase racial equity and student completion to better understand best practices and challenges that are occurring at the local level that may not be represented in state-wide data and in SOAA assessments, which focus mostly on reporting the scaling of specific activities.

Overview of the Study and Design

This qualitative multi-site case study investigates the implementation of Guided Pathways at two California Community Colleges within a large urban community college

district. Since Guided Pathways has only begun to be fully implemented within the last five years, few empirical studies have examined its implementation at California Community Colleges with an emphasis on achieving student equity. Therefore, this study explores the experiences and perceptions of faculty and administrators regarding the implementation of Guided Pathways activities focused on increasing racial equity. Utilizing two data collection methods, documentation review and qualitative interviews, I conduct an in-depth analysis of the case sites (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This study is guided by the following research questions:

Research Questions

1. In what ways are two California Community Colleges implementing Guided Pathways?
    a. What have colleges done to implement pillar one: "Clarify the path"?
    b. What have colleges done to implement pillar two: "Help students choose and enter a path"?
2. In what ways are two California Community Colleges implementing Guided Pathways within the first two pillars to advance racial equity?
    a. What connections are colleges making between implementing Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity?
    b. How are faculty and administrators making sense of these in relation to their understanding of equity?
3. Within these two cases, what are faculty and administrators' challenges, if any, with advancing racial equity while implementing Guided Pathways?

<div align="center">

Significance

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An essential goal of Guided Pathways is to increase the rate of underrepresented students earning college credentials, particularly in fields of high economic value, while also closing gaps

for low-income students, students of color, returning adults, and other groups with inequitable outcomes (Jenkins et al., 2021). Students traditionally underserved by higher education institutions, such as first-generation college students, students from low-income backgrounds, and students of color, may require additional support (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Over half of California Community College students saw a decrease in their income in 2020 due to lay-offs, furloughs, or work reductions associated with COVID-19, with greater impacts among students of color (California Community Colleges, 2022). In addition, nearly 60% of California Community College students reported food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness in 2020 (California Community Colleges, 2020). Students of color were 16 percentage points more likely to report at least one basic needs insecurity than white students (California Community Colleges, 2020). As CCC's continue to implement Guided Pathways while pursuing the goals of *Vision 2030*, it is imperative for key stakeholders to dedicate more focus to advancing racial equity to better serve students of color.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

With the launch of the *Vision 2030,* CCCCO funding and a call to eliminate racial inequities within CCCs, there has been a growing interest in the implementation of Guided Pathways as a student-centered approach to education reform in community colleges (CCCCO, 2021). This approach aims to provide a clear and structured pathway for students to navigate the often-complex choices they face in selecting a program of study and progressing towards a degree or credential. While the Guided Pathways model has shown promise in improving student outcomes, more research needs to investigate how it may increase equity and access for students from marginalized communities. Specifically, there is a need to examine how Guided Pathways implementation may impact racial equity and to identify strategies for addressing equity concerns within this framework. This literature review explores the current research on Guided Pathways implementation and racial equity, with a focus on identifying best practices for promoting equity and access for students of color attending community colleges. First, this review describes each of the four pillars and the research surrounding them. Next, an overview of additional frameworks for understanding Guided Pathways implementation, including Completion by Design, and evaluating systemic change is discussed. Then, a connection between Guided Pathways and racial equity is introduced, including a discussion of research focused on implementing and assessing policies, such as Guided Pathways from a racial equity lens. This chapter concludes with an introduction to critical policy analysis as a conceptual framework to evaluate Guided Pathways implementation.

<center>**Existing Research Around the Four Pillars of Pathways**</center>

The Guided Pathways framework is organized around four pillars to create a structured approach to student success by providing students with a set of clear course-taking patterns to promote better enrollment decisions and to prepare students to achieve their future career goals (CCCCO, n.d.b). I use the four pillars as an organizational structure for existing literature on Guided Pathways and recent findings. Early studies on colleges implementing pathways highlight that implementation falls along various degrees of adoption (Bailey-Hofmann, 2019). Furthermore, varying forms of the Guided Pathways framework have been implemented nationwide in colleges, such as Queensborough Community College, Miami Dade College, the City University of New York, Arizona State University, Florida State University (Bailey et al., 2015b), and California Community Colleges. Nationally, over 200 colleges are implementing Guided Pathways (Jenkins et al., 2017), and that number has grown since California has invested in implementing this framework.

Pillar One: Clarify the Path

Guided Pathways is focused on clarifying students' educational goals by creating clear curricular pathways that lead to employment and further education. This process involves simplifying students' choices with default program maps and establishing transfer pathways by aligning courses and expected learning outcomes with transfer institutions. One way that colleges have implemented clear educational pathways for students is by creating "meta-majors" (Waugh, 2016). Meta-majors are maps or lists of classes in exact order by semester for students to finish a program, such as a degree or certificate. Meta-majors contain more than one academic discipline related to a large category of careers. For example, science, math, and engineering programs may be grouped together to allow students to explore a STEM major while also taking

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classes that are related to STEM careers. Although a student may switch majors, taking classes within a larger meta-major allows them to continue to make progress toward their educational goals efficiently because programs within a meta-major often share prerequisite courses and common curriculum (Waugh, 2016).

While many institutions engaged in pathways reform efforts have focused on creating meta-majors, few colleges have evaluated their impact on student success and completion. In addition, other college efforts, such as course scheduling, have not been aligned with meta-major groups (Sublett & Orenstein, 2021). Even though colleges have created these maps, colleges may not be scheduling classes based on them, which impacts course availability and student completion. Students may enter a specific path, but if the college is not scheduling the appropriate number of sections and courses for each pathway, then students are not able to follow their meta-major course sequence. Aside from scheduling, Schudde et al. (2020) explain that community college students switch majors at high rates, even between fields that are broadly related. Therefore, these researchers recommend examining what causes students to switch majors within the context of pathways and identifying additional barriers for students.

Since meta-majors are focused on career choices, researchers have examined how colleges articulate and understand career options for students. Rose et al. (2019) suggest that an effective student retention strategy involves using equity-focused labor market data to inform course content and pedagogical practices. Furthermore, they recommend:

(a) developing career communities that integrate students' funds of knowledge and labor histories (Neri, 2018); (b) creating differentiated work-based learning opportunities for diverse sub-groups of students (e.g., student-parents, adult learners, minoritized students,

formerly incarcerated students,); and (c) utilizing regional and equity-focused labor market data to inform practice. (p. 65)

While organizing academic programs into meta-majors is an important step to clarify educational pathways for students, some colleges have simplified Guided Pathways implementation only to developing meta-majors. Furthermore, when developing meta-majors, some colleges have reduced offerings and created educational silos that may hinder a student's ability to earn a college degree (Jenkins et al., 2022).

Jenkins et al., (2022) explain that some colleges have cut programs and courses when creating meta-majors without justifying these choices based on learning outcomes and career options. In addition, some colleges have mapped Career Technical Education (CTE) programs separate from transfer programs, which may restrict students from stacking their certificate credentials to ultimately earn a bachelor's degree. While creating a CTE pathway that leads to a certificate may be beneficial at the beginning of a student's educational and professional career, students may also benefit from additional education that could provide more career advancement in the future. Moreover, mapping CTE programs separate from transfer programs may reinforce equity concerns and encourage students from lower socio-economic status and underserved backgrounds to pursue lower unit certificate programs rather than transfer-level coursework, which could lead to less income over a student's lifespan. To address these equity concerns, Fink and Jenkins (2020) developed a guide and data tool to support colleges in analyzing data to better understand student enrollment, program completion, and to examine the representation of marginalized student groups in programs leading to greater opportunities after graduation. Yet, the extent to which colleges are using these resources to address racial equity gaps while implementing Guided Pathways is unclear. While colleges have created initial meta-majors for

students, empirical data is needed to evaluate their influences on increasing equity, career obtainment, and transfer.

Colleges should look beyond typical career pathways to serve students who are traditionally underserved. Bailey (2015) argues that most community colleges are structured around a "cafeteria" model of career exploration and learning. The cafeteria model is a metaphor used to describe students' experiences with making choices about what classes to take and how these choices can lead to a degree, certificate and/or transfer. When a person enters a cafeteria, they grab a tray and begin picking different food items based on what is available, what might look appetizing, or what might be suggested by someone serving a meal. By the time the person gets to the register to pay, they may or may not have a complete healthy meal although they have many options and various items to choose. Community college students face a similar challenge. Community colleges are open access and provide many possibilities for students, including various majors, career technical education, courses, and different alternatives for completing general education requirements. Even though there are many options for students to choose, these options do not always support student completion. Moreover, the various choices may increase confusion among students as they work toward their career and educational goals. Furthermore, students sometimes enroll in community colleges only a few weeks before the start of their classes and have no specific plans about the potential majors and programs offered by the college. Students are left to their own devices to find their way through the community college system since they are not required to seek counseling or other support services. Thus, creating clear academic maps for students is vital to increasing equity and student success.

Since creating academic maps is a foundational activity for Guided Pathways implementation, researchers have investigated how colleges are creating program maps. Jenkins

et al. (2017) report on the early work of 30 colleges participating in the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) Pathways Project. Drawing on data from college self-assessments, telephone interviews and in-depth two-day site visits at six of the colleges, the authors identified where colleges are taking similar approaches, noted unique or innovative strategies, and discussed lessons learned from their experiences. Regarding pillar one, each college made substantial progress outlining programs of study by mapping meta-majors focused on careers. Colleges were also focused on redesigning their websites to show how program maps connect to career and transfer opportunities. However, many of the AACC pathways colleges initially developed program maps for college-ready students and equity gaps were not analyzed while developing these maps. While additional research is needed to understand how equity gaps are supported by implementing program maps, research has focused on how meta-majors influence students' choices and decision-making.

A study by Baker (2018) examined students' decision-making process at an institution in Northern California to determine whether classifying meta-majors is assisting students in selecting their majors or if it has made this process more difficult. Out of the 297 students surveyed for this study, it was discovered that some student groups (males and Asian Americans) responded more positively to the meta-majors that were developed, whereas other student groups (Latinxs, whites, and older students) did not benefit from meta-majors. The researcher concluded that grouping majors by profession could be more beneficial (for some students) than grouping them by subject affiliation, which is an important finding considering meta-major creation varies among community colleges. This study demonstrates that, despite the potential for choice architecture to facilitate students' decision-making, building this infrastructure without first

understanding how various student groups explore majors can compromise the overall objectives of enhancing student persistence and retention (Cesar-Davis, 2020).

One of the first major Guided Pathways activities that colleges implement focuses on clarifying academic pathways. Previous research has examined how colleges have launched this type of program reform even before the complete Guided Pathways framework was developed. For example, in 2010, City Colleges of Chicago launched a reform called, *Reinvention,* which focused on creating more clearly structured program pathways with integrated support to increase student completion (Fink, 2017). By fall of 2015, City Colleges of Chicago fully implemented program maps and individual student education plans. CCRC researchers conducted one-on-one interviews with 149 first-year students over the course of two semesters and asked "students about their decisions to attend college, how their career and academic interests had developed over time, the process of enrolling and signing up for courses [at the college], if and how they knew which courses to take to achieve their goals, and about their interactions with advisors" (Fink, 2017, p. 3). The findings from this study suggest that most students' opinions focused on program maps, educational planning, and tracking their progress toward completion. Furthermore, half of the students expressed concerns about implementation, including that the program maps limited their choices, a need for more guidance when moving through and out of pathways, and poorly organized online resources. Conversely, many students described the program maps and educational plans as helpful and motivating. The researcher's findings also suggest that while students found the programs maps to be valuable resources, advisors serve critical roles in supporting students during the process.

College implementing Guided Pathways are working to provide students with opportunities to build self-efficacy. Bensley (2018) examined the relationship between Guided

Pathways and student self-efficacy and persistence in community colleges. This dissertation study uses a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and interviews with first-time, full-time community college students enrolled in Guided Pathway programs and those not enrolled in Guided Pathway programs. The results of the study indicated that students enrolled in Guided Pathway programs had higher levels of college self-efficacy and were more likely to persist in their studies compared to students not enrolled in Guided Pathway programs. The study also identified several factors that contributed to higher levels of self-efficacy and persistence, including the clarity of academic and career pathways, personalized support and guidance, and opportunities for experiential learning and career exploration. Overall, the study suggests that Guided Pathways can have a positive impact on student self-efficacy and persistence in community colleges and highlights the importance of providing students with clear pathways, personalized support, and hands-on learning opportunities. Yet, this study suggests that future research is needed to better understand the relationship between Guided Pathways on students from various racial and ethnic identities.

As California Community Colleges implement Guided Pathways, many colleges have also first focused on developing program maps and using technology to communicate these pathways to students. As colleges continue to scale Guided Pathways activities focused on the pillar one, researchers could collect additional qualitative data to collect experiences and perceptions of these activities from the individuals' supporting students during implementation as well as the students' experiencing these institutional changes. Bonds (2022) suggests that for Guided Pathways activities to intentionally focus on race conscious inquiry and design, workgroups and/or Guided Pathways committees should consider collecting and analyzing disaggregated data regarding student of color enrollment in each meta-major, placement and

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recruitment of students from racially diverse background into meta-majors that prepare students for high-wage employment, and how the college actively aims to support students of color with access to academic and co-curricular equitability. Overall, while helping students clarify their path is vital for student success, increasing opportunities for students from populations that have historically been underrepresented in higher education and marginalized in society, such as Black, Latinx, and Native American students, is especially crucial. Community colleges must reinforce their essential role in creating academic pathways to clear careers and opportunities that support all students to ensure equal access to higher-opportunity programs.

Pillar Two: Enter the Path

While there is limited evaluative research on how students enter the path, preliminary research is focused on the importance of early meta-major entry. Colleges implementing Guided Pathways help students choose and enter a pathway that is mapped through program completion. Jenkins and Weiss (2011) found a strong correlation between early program entry and degree completion or transfer. While studying administrative data from Washington State, the researchers charted the educational pathways of first-time community college students over seven years. More than half of first-year program participants received a credential or transferred. In a similar study, Jenkins and Cho (2012) found that students who earned at least eight college credits in a program area within the first year were 20 percentage points more likely to earn a credential or transfer within seven years than those who did not. Aside from ensuring students enter clear educational pathways, research has also focused on the role of advising in promoting student equity and completion (Allen, 2020).

Outside of California, several community colleges in New York that have implemented pathways have reported positive results regarding student retention. According to the City

University of New York (CUNY)'s Office of Institutional Research and Assessment reported that in 2009, all first-time, full-time students at Queensborough Community College were required to enroll in one of the college's five freshman academies (Bailey et al., 2015b). Since implementation of this policy, first-year retention rates at the college have increased, and the college's three-year graduation rate rose from 12% to 16% for the 2009 cohort. While being a full-time student is not a requirement within the CCC Guided Pathways framework, this study highlights how academic academies or a cohort of students within a specific pathway may lead to higher student retention. The study explained that while faculty and administrators were not able to determine the extent to which the academies might be responsible for increased retention rate, they believe they were effective. That stated, this study does not explore faculty and administrators' perceptions of the academies on achieving greater racial equity among retention rates.

Aside from Queensborough Community College, other CUNY schools have implemented and researched components of Guided Pathways focused on supporting students entering their path. The Community College Research Center conducted research at Guttman College, a new CUNY institution built on the concepts of Guided Pathways. All first-time students were expected to enroll full-time, attend a summer bridge program, and follow a shared first-year curriculum designed to aid them in deciding on a major and vocation (Bailey et al., 2015b). Twenty-eight percent of Guttman's first year entering class of 2012 had earned an associate degree by August 2014, and the college said it was on track to reach its three-year target of graduating 35% of its students. In comparison, community colleges in big cities have a typical three-year graduation rate of 13% (Bailey et al., 2015b). This research suggests that Guided

Pathways increases student completion among community college students, yet the study did not examine the impact of Guttman's program through a racial equity lens.

Increased graduation rates among community college students can also lead to positive outcomes for four-year universities. Wheeler (2019) argues that Guided Pathways can influence transfer orientation methods at four-year institutions, expanding their reach beyond the confines of community colleges. For example, aside from academies and bridge programs, the results of high impact assessment practices, such as electronic portfolios in advising can facilitate information sharing between two- and four-year college advisors since they give a student's decision-making process context and a more complete picture of their major (Allen et al., 2014; Wheeler, 2019). Overall, once students choose a path, colleges must ensure that they stay on their path to graduation, which is the focus of pillar three.

Pillar Three: Stay on the Path

Pillar three of Guided Pathways is focused on improving advising processes and holistic student services so that students can make better decisions about their majors, course-taking, and related college experiences and thus stay on the path. Strategies, such as major-specific counseling, career advising, and early alert systems, support students by identifying challenges early to keep students on their path. Karp et al. (2008) argue that traditional models of counseling and academic support often exclude students who do not have the cultural capital to navigate services, such as first-generation college students. Moreover, students in career and technical education (CTE) often receive more tailored support (Completion by Design, n.d.), which may explain why we see higher success rates in cohort and career-specific programs. For example, the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges developed the Integrated Basic Education and Skills Training (I-BEST) model to help adult students in basic skills classes enter

and complete CTE programs using pathways design principles. Students in I-BEST programs accumulated more college-level credits and were more likely to earn a certificate within three years than non-I-BEST students. To scale the best practices in CTE programs, Guided Pathways calls for advising to be more structured and inclusive (Completion by Design, n.d.). In a study conducted by Fowler and Boylan (2010), student retention from one year to the next increased by 23% when advisors required three appointments in the first semester.

Counseling is also vital to student persistence and addressing equity gaps. The Guided Pathways framework is focused on improving student advising and counseling services. Allen (2020)'s dissertation study explored the role of counselors in promoting equity and access for students within the context of Guided Pathways in California community colleges. The study used a qualitative approach, including interviews with counselors involved in implementation. The results of the study indicated that counselors play a critical role in promoting equity and access for students in Guided Pathways, by providing personalized support and guidance, addressing individual student needs and barriers, and helping students navigate complex academic and career pathways. The study also identified several challenges and barriers that counselors face in promoting equity and access, including limited resources, heavy caseloads, and a lack of institutional support and recognition. Overall, the study suggests that counselors can have a significant impact on student equity and access in Guided Pathways and highlights the importance of providing counselors with the resources, training, and support they need to effectively serve students from diverse backgrounds.

While counselors play a crucial role in implementing Guided Pathways, challenges such as workload and resource constraints hinder implementation. Welter (2020)'s dissertation explores the implementation of Guided Pathways in California community colleges from the

perspective of college counselors. The study found that while counselors play a pivotal role, several essential elements for successful implementation must also be included, such as professional development, counseling technology, and enhancing communication strategies. The study also highlighted challenges, such as workload and resource constraints that hindered the implementation. Ultimately, the study concluded that the successful implementation of Guided Pathways requires ongoing collaboration and communication among all stakeholders, including counselors, faculty, and administrators.

In addition to advising, instructional support plays an important role in student success. Efforts, such as redesigning remedial courses, recontextualizing quantitative reasoning courses, and stronger tutoring, help keep students on their path. Johnstone and Karandjeff (2017) call for a need to reform curriculum, especially around math, given that typically only science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) majors require more complex math to reach their educational goals. When developing pathways from non-STEM majors, colleges must think strategically about what skills students need to develop that support their education and career goals and select coursework according to their specific goals and pathways. Skuratowicz et al. (2020) examined the effectiveness of a contextualized developmental math course in improving outcomes for community college students in intermediate algebra. The results indicate that students who took the contextualized course had higher pass rates and were more likely to complete the intermediate algebra course than students who took the traditional course. The contextualized course also had a positive impact on students' attitudes towards math and their self-efficacy in the subject. The study concluded that context-related developmental math courses may be a promising approach for improving outcomes for community college students in intermediate algebra. Ultimately, Guided Pathways is focused on ensuring that students are

learning and can earn a certification or degree (Bailey & Morest, 2006; Bailey et al., 2015a). To increase completion, California's community colleges must rethink their academic and student support services and ensure that students are learning in and out of the classroom.

Pillar Four: Ensure Learning

Pillar four of Guided Pathways is focused on ensuring that students are learning. Practices include applied learning experiences; evidence-based, high-impact teaching practices; equity-focused teaching and learning practices, such as culturally responsive teaching; and high-quality assessment related to learning outcomes that lead to further education and gainful employment (CCCCO, n.d.b). In collaboration with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AACU), the University of Texas's Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) worked with 20 community colleges to build institutional capacity and develop resources for colleges to implement while scaling pathways. This study found that providing educators with additional professional development focused on high-impact assessment practices improved how students learn in the classroom. According to their *Teaching and Learning Within a Guided Pathways Framework: A Playbook* (2020), students who participate in internships and applied learning experiences are more likely to be exposed to various practices that improve their engagement. Students who take part in internships or other applied learning opportunities are more likely to be exposed to various strategies that increase engagement. Although there are many campuses where Guided Pathways are being implemented, researchers believe it may still be too early for most universities to notice a substantial improvement in student outcomes (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE], 2020a).

The Community College Research Center (CCRC) has noted that Guided Pathways implementation focused on pillar four, ensuring learning, is the least developed area of practice (CCCSE, 2020). However, researchers have examined activities that fall within pillar four prior to wide-spread Guided Pathways implementation. For example, Price and Tovar (2014) examined the relationship between student engagement and graduation rates in community colleges. The study used a national dataset to identify high-impact educational practices (HIPs) that are associated with higher graduation rates in community colleges. The HIPs identified include first-year seminars, learning communities, service learning, and undergraduate research. The study also found that the degree of student engagement in these practices is positively related to graduation rates, and the combination of multiple HIPs is particularly effective in promoting student success. The article concludes that community colleges should focus on implementing HIPs as part of a comprehensive strategy to improve student engagement and increase graduation rates.

Aside from high-impact assessment practices, research has also examined the relationship between culturally responsive pedagogy and student success (Abdi & Cuomo, 2020). Manning (2019) explains that culturally responsive teaching practices can be an effective tool for promoting student success and engagement in community college settings, and ongoing support and professional development opportunities are needed to ensure successful implementation. Gale (2014) explored the implementation and impact of a culturally responsive teaching professional development program in a community college setting. Gale (2014) presents a qualitative case study of a culturally responsive teaching professional development program implemented at a community college in the Midwest and examines the experiences and perceptions of faculty members who participated in the program. The study found that the

program was effective in promoting culturally responsive teaching practices among faculty members, and participation in the program was associated with increased awareness of cultural diversity and improved teaching practices. The study also found that faculty members who participated in the program faced challenges in implementing culturally responsive teaching practices, such as resistance from students or colleagues and limited institutional support. The Gale (2014) found that culturally responsive teaching professional development programs can be effective in promoting culturally responsive teaching practices in community college settings, but ongoing support and resources are needed to ensure successful implementation and sustainability. To respond to the needs of students of color, researchers and practitioners must explore culturally responsive teaching and learning practices to make structural inequities visible. Yet, more research needs to be conducted to understand how Guided Pathways implementation is supporting culturally responsive teaching. While the four pillars offer a clear framework for organizing implementation efforts, further emphasis on equity is required to develop effective methods for boosting student performance.

More Research Needed on Implementation Practices

Early research on Guided Pathways has focused on activities that support each of the four pillars. Yet, gaps in the literature exist especially examining the activities colleges are implementing to support racial equity. The extent to which colleges are using the resources developed by research centers and the CCCCO to address racial equity gaps while implementing Guided Pathways is unclear. For example, while colleges have created initial meta-majors for students, empirical data is needed to evaluate their influences on increasing equity, career obtainment, and transfer. In addition, more research is required to explore how colleges are designing implementation in ways that build social capital and increase students' understanding

of higher education while creating clear academic pathways with holistic support. Moreover, while one dissertation examines counselors' perspectives on Guided Pathways and equity, additional research is needed to examine faculty and administrator perceptions of the implementation on achieving greater racial equity and any challenges they may face while striving to increase racially equitable outcomes. Overall, future research is needed to better realize the relationship between Guided Pathways on students from various racial and ethnic identities. Thus, this study is focused on learning more about Guided Pathways implementation, especially in the context of reducing equity gaps by interviewing additional stakeholders and individuals responsible for implementation.

As early adopters have implemented Guided Pathways, additional resources, tools, and metrics have been developed to support scaling these efforts. Evidence based practices that promote student success, such as Completion by Design, have been adopted to identify the most effective strategies for substantiating student success and has provided guidance on how to implement these strategies within the context of the Guided Pathways framework. The next part of this literature review discusses Completion by Design as a tool to evaluate how colleges are implementing systematic change and how colleges can evaluate how Guided Pathways activities are impacting the student experience to achieve greater student equity.

Completion by Design

One of the primary goals of Guided Pathways is to close achievement disparities for low-income students, students of color, returning adults, and other groups with inequitable outcomes, such a completion rates and duration to completion, while also increasing the number of disadvantaged students who graduate from college (Bailey et al., 2015b). To reach these objectives, institutions must carefully assess how they welcome, advise, and educate students

who have traditionally been underrepresented and/or underserved in higher education (Community College Research Center [CCRC], 2020). To that end, in 2010, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded a five-year initiative that worked with nine community colleges in three states to support Guided Pathways implementation and significantly increase completion and graduation rates for low-income students (Grossman et al., 2015). The framework used in this study is called Completion by Design.

Using the Completion by Design framework, institutions may better coordinate their practices, policies, and programs to create routes that will successfully guide students into and through college (Completion by Design, n.d.). The Loss/Momentum Framework (LMF), a component of Completion by Design, helps colleges determine where extra resources may be applied to ensure program completion by pointing out areas where students may experience barriers. LMF tracks students through their five interactions with the college (Connection, Entry, Progress, Completion, and Transition) and helps the college spot areas where there are opportunities to keep students in school and increase their momentum toward achieving their academic objectives (Completion by Design, n.d.). Overall, Completion by Design requires colleges to systematically change and transform how they support student completion. Therefore, research needs to be conducted to study transformation at colleges that are using the Completion by Design framework to implement Guided Pathways. Since Guided Pathways concentrates on all aspects of an institution, this study shines a light on activities that are attentive to racial equity and influencing systemic change.

Systemic Change

Before systemic change can occur, institutions must clearly define the reform they are hoping to achieve. According to Grossman et al. (2015), institutional change can be described by

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two dimensions: the extent to which students throughout the entire college experience a change (diffusion) and the extent to which faculty and administrators modify their norms and beliefs to align with those underlying changes (acceptance). Guided Pathways is a systemic transformation effort because its focus is to comprehensively shift how a college serves students across the institution while also transforming the culture of the college to focus on completion in the context of the student journey. While frameworks that support Guided Pathways, such as Completion by Design, are being implemented to advance equity goals, evaluating the progress that colleges are making is vital to understanding the relationship between implementation and positive change.

Evaluating Systemic Change

Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) are used by colleges following the Completion by Design framework to construct Guided Pathways to assess performance based on student progress and completion (Completion by Design, n.d.). KPIs are a collection of measurements created by Completion by Design to assess students' advancement through the Loss Momentum Framework phases and pinpoint areas that still require improvement (Completion by Design, n.d.). Eleven KPIs across the stages of LMF have been established by Completion by Design to track student progress. They include short-term goals like credit accumulation during the first term or completing college-level math in one year and longer-term goals like the proportion of students who transfer or complete credentials within five years. KPIs are created locally to direct college dialogue around the student experience and work toward greater student completion (Completion by Design, n.d.). While Completion by Design and KPIs provide opportunities to evaluate and measure progress, they do not include measures on centralizing racial equity across all aspects of Guided Pathways implementation.

However, some colleges are addressing racial equity regarding access and success. For example, Frederick Community College in Maryland is focused on closing racial equity gaps by creating 16 benchmarks to assess their success in closing equity gaps for students across all demographic groups. By infusing racial equity through institutional interventions, professional development and both the student and employee experience, the college is making explicit connections about how to assess their racial equity goals (Frederick Community College, n.d.). If colleges are going to achieve better outcomes for students, they must explore the perceptions of Guided Pathways implementation on their progress related to their racial equity goals.

To better understand how CCCs are addressing equity, the CCCCO collaborated with the Center for Urban Education (CUE) to understand how racial equity is incorporated into the SEA plans, provide recommendations for writing race-conscious plans, and offer recommendations to the CCCCO for future equity planning (Chase et al., 2020). The CUE focuses on racial equity because equity among racially minoritized students continues to be a big opportunity for CCCs. Chase et al. (2020) argue that SEA plan can be used as a tool to achieve racial equity and organizational change. To frame their project, the researchers adopted a critical policy perspective, which posits policy implementation as a social act played out by social actors that come to the work with various beliefs, values, and competing priorities (Dumas & Anyon, 2006). To better understand how colleges are attempting to increase equity in student success, SEA reviewers categorized each activity by "equity asset type." Equity asset types include structures, programs, personnel, policies, capacity building-general, capacity building-equity focused, or the development of culturally relevant curriculum (Felix & Castro, 2018). Therefore, policies focusing on equity can reinforce and perpetuate the status quo if implementers are not critically reflexive of their experiences and perceptions (Bensimon, 2012). Their findings suggest that

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racial equity is not explicit in SEA plans, and equity efforts are often fragmented rather than being a campus-wide effort; recommendations include focusing inward on cultural change through equity-focused professional development. Regarding faculty and administrators implementing Guided Pathways, the SEA plan and are the SOAA do not provide opportunities to assess their perceptions and experiences.

Racial Equity

Since the CCCCO requires CCCs to submit a SEA plan, equity has become a widely used term especially during college-wide planning and policy implementation. Yet, the degree to which colleges have a shared vision of what equity means in the context of Guided Pathways and the student journey varies. For example, some colleges may have a broad definition of equity while other institutions may distinguish between racial, class and gender equity, or offer an intersectional understanding of student equity (Boateng, 2020). The purpose of this study is to focus explicitly on racial equity. Racial equity is a process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for students of color (Boateng, 2020). Racial equity is achieved when race no longer determines one's socioeconomic outcomes. Chase et al. (2020) argues that for an equity policy to truly be a successful tool for racial equity that racially minoritized students need to be at the center of its focus and implementation. Yet, Felix and Trinidad (2019) articulate that too often, "well intentioned," educational policies that seek to address racial inequity fail to achieve their desired results. They argue that policies, mandates, and implementation guidelines must be developed that are race conscious. Furthermore, they call for policymakers, state-level actions and implementers to practice, equity-mindedness, which requires an awareness of how policies that may seem race-neutral may be participating and reinforcing practices that continue to reproduce inequitable outcomes for racially-minoritized students (Bensimon, 2007). To

achieve racial equity, college must integrate racial equity into their Guided Pathways implementation.

Racialized Organizations

Ray (2019) defines racialized organizations as those in which race is a fundamental part of their structure and function. He argues that organizations are not race-neutral but are instead deeply embedded with racial hierarchies and practices that influence how they operate and how resources are distributed within them. There are four central mechanisms that define racialized organizations. First, organizations are mesolevel social structures that reduce the personal agency and collective efficacy of marginalized racial groups while enhancing the agency of those in dominant racial groups. Second, racialized organizations establish rules and norms that justify the unequal distribution of resources. Third, whiteness functions as an organizational asset, conferring status and justifying the allocation of resources based on perceived merit. Last, there is often a gap between formal organizational rules and actual practices, where rules are applied in ways that benefit whites and sustain whiteness, while commitments to racial equity are often not fully enacted in practice. These mechanisms illustrate how racialized organizations are continuously recreated over time. This framework can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of policies and change efforts, such as Guided Pathways, by assessing how well they disrupt or replace these modes of racial reproduction. Understanding community colleges as a type of racialized organization provides a context for examining how colleges may be actively contributing to the constructions and maintenance of racial inequities (McCambly et al., 2023).

Integrating Racial Equity into the Guided Pathways Framework

As noted by Bonds (2022), racial equity needs to be more centralized in Guided Pathways work and implementation. To address inequities in progression and success for students of color in Health Sciences, Chattanooga State Community College in Tennessee added on to their existing foundation of Guided Pathways reforms, which include individualized academic planning, program guidance, and career information. Faculty redesigned critical program gateway courses, emphasized critical thinking skills needed in the health field, and created a health career-focused college success course, resulting in improved outcomes in the human anatomy and physiology course and lab. Now, faculty and staff are examining barriers to student success in other program pathways where similar changes could be implemented (Jenkins et al., 2018).

While colleges have focused on equity more broadly during Guided Pathways implementation, racial equity continues to be collapsed under the umbrella term of equity. Bonds (2022) explains that applying a racial equity lens to the Guided Pathways framework is essential to avoid perpetuating practices that bolster race-neutral policies and reinforce the status quo. Furthermore, she explains that to engage in anti-racist redesign efforts, Guided Pathways implementers must participate in intentional, race-conscious inquiry, design, and evaluation.

Assessing Pathways Implementation Toward Equity Goals

Aside from implementing and scaling pathways, a college must also assess their progress. To measure the progress CCCs are making toward scaling pathways efforts, colleges complete an annual Scale of Adoption Assessment (SOAA). The first version of the SOAA focused on key elements for each pillar. A second version was adopted in 2020 that also includes a series of equity considerations to help spark dialogue to maintain equity focus on pathways efforts.

Guided Pathways and equity-minded practices may be related, but each require separate

and integrated layers of support. Some colleges may create their Guided Pathways changes first,

and then create equity-conscious policies and programs to build on that effort. Others may

undertake Guided Pathway improvements that are purposefully equity-minded by starting their

Guided Pathways work with historically underrepresented students in mind (Brown, 2021). The

National Center for Inquiry & Improvement (NCII) developed *The Advancing Equity Through*

Guided Pathways Series, which features a series of briefs, resources, guides, and assessments

that address various intersections of equity and the Guided Pathways framework (The National

Center for Inquiry & Improvement [NCII], 2022). First, an institutional self-assessment for

equity is provided to help college teams examine their policies, program, and practices from an

equity lens. The self-assessment uses a five-point scale ranging from "practice not present, and

there is no discussion on its impact" to "practice is embedded within institutional actions and

policy-making." It includes 11 equitable practices and discussion questions (NCII, 2022). This

self-assessment may be used as an additional resource for assessing equity during Guided

Pathways implementation. NCII also developed guides to "examine equity issues in the context

of culture and leadership with a focus on fostering faculty diversity and promoting equity as the

executive level" (NCII, 2022). Guides 5-11 in this series "explore equity issues in the student

experience" and are aligned with the stages of Completion by Design and the Loss/Momentum

Framework. While these guides provide opportunities for colleges to evaluate their Guided

Pathways implementation from an equity perspective, no empirical studies have relied on these

guides to examine implementation at a particular college or within a multi-site case study.

Therefore, future research may use NCII's resources as a framework for evaluating equity within

Guided Pathways. To better understand how to evaluate pathways implementation, it is necessary to understand the relationship between racial equity and policy implementation.

Racial Equity and Policy Implementation

Policy implementation describes how a law is put into practice and finally achieves the goals for which it was originally created. Gonzalez et al. (2021) argue that policy implementation in higher education and specifically within community colleges has been largely understudied. Furthermore, Ching et al. (2020) highlight the lack of significant change in the circumstances, experience, and outcomes for students of color as a result of equity work within policy implementation. Although several regulations have been put in place to improve access and address injustice, historically marginalized and excluded populations still encounter obstacles, such as barriers to college entry, hostile campus environments, and institutional structurers that influence degree attainment (Arbona & Nora, 2007; Carales, 2020; Gonzalez et al., 2021; Hoachlander et al., 2003; Wassmer et al., 2004). Similarly, Harper et al. (2009) discuss the prevalence of racially motivated policies that are ingrained in dominant, racist, and hegemonic frameworks that persistently cast doubt on African Americans' capacity to be informed citizens and the legitimacy of their participation in higher education. While California has been at the forefront of equity policy implementation with the SEA plan to close equity gaps for disproportionately impacted students (Gonzalez et al., 2021), inequitable outcomes continue to persist even within the context of Guided Pathways implementation.

Assessing Racial Equity by Examining Experiences and Perceptions

Recent dissertation studies have provided insights into the practical challenges and opportunities CCCs face while implementing Guided Pathways reforms. Hargreaves (2022) conducted a qualitative study that examines the experiences and perspectives of practitioners

involved in implementing Guided Pathways. The study conducted in-depth interviews with 14 practitioners from different CCC campuses, including faculty members, counselors, administrators, and staff. The interviews were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach to identify common themes and patterns. The study found that the implementation of Guided Pathways reforms was a complex and challenging process, requiring significant organizational and cultural changes. The practitioners reported that Guided Pathways reforms had positive impacts on student success and institutional effectiveness, but also faced several barriers and challenges, such as inadequate resources, resistance to change, and difficulties in communication and collaboration. Similarly, Tombari (2022) examined faculty members' experiences with the implementation of Guided Pathways at two CCCs. The study used qualitative research methods to gather data and the findings suggest that while faculty members recognize the potential benefits of Guided Pathways, they also encounter challenges and limitations in their implementation. Faculty members reported concerns about issues such as workload, limited resources, and lack of clarity about the pathways. The study recommends that community colleges provide more support and resources for faculty to effectively implement Guided Pathways and ensure that it meets its intended goals. While previous dissertation studies have examined the experiences and perceptions of individuals implementing Guided Pathways, no studies have focused explicitly on examining the experiences and perceptions of implementers on achieving greater racial equity.

Assessing policy with an equity lens involves examining the lived experiences and perceptions of those participating in the implementation. The first step for critical practitioners is to admit their own subjectivity and the ways in which their positionality affects their actions. In addition, implementers must recognize their agency as collaborators and knowers. Moreover,

practitioners must prioritize marginalized voices when gathering, interpreting, and enacting change. Such methods enrich assessment practice and allow for the transformational use of data in the pursuit of equity (Heiser et al., 2017). Murphy (2021) examined the implementation of Guided Pathways in community colleges from the perspective of college leaders. The study found that successful implementation of Guided Pathways required a comprehensive and collaborative approach that involved all college stakeholders. The study identified several critical factors for successful implementation, including effective leadership, faculty engagement, student-centered approaches, and the use of data to inform decision-making. The study also highlighted challenges such as funding constraints, resistance to change, and the need for ongoing professional development. Ultimately, the study concluded that the implementation of Guided Pathways requires a transformative change in college culture and a commitment to continuous improvement. Future research can examine these strategies from a critical perspective to better understand the experiences of those marginalized and underserved.

For organizational transformation to truly occur, practitioners must participate in critical self-reflection that moves beyond just acknowledging and addressing the practical challenges faced by students and implementers.

Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

This study relies on racialized organization theory and policy analysis as a lens for researching Guided Pathways. While education policies, such as Guided Pathways, aim to improve inequitable student outcomes, few policies encompass all of the essential elements required for institutional leaders to implement change (Ching et al., 2020). Policy analysis is a tool to examine and evaluate policies to understand their effectiveness, implications, and potential outcomes for facilitating change based on policy implementation. Some scholars argue

traditional policy analysis focuses on only one aspect of the policy, rather than considering the

context of the policy, the values reflected in the policy, and how different groups are affected

differently by the policy (Roberston & Muirhead, 2022). However, policy is a complex process

that involves various elements, including actors, contexts, trajectories, levers, and outcomes.

This study examines Guided Pathways as a complex policy that involves each of these elements.

Understanding the multifaceted elements of policy, including policy actors, context,

levers, and outcomes, is essential for evaluating the impact of initiatives such as Guided

Pathways on advancing racial equity. Actors receive policies and are responsible for enacting

and implementing them (Ball et al., 2011). Context refers to the broader environment in which a

policy is formulated, implemented, and evaluated. It encompasses various factors such as

political, economic, social, cultural, and historical elements that influence the development and

implementation of policies. Understanding the policy context is crucial for policymakers,

practitioners, and researchers because it helps them assess the feasibility, effectiveness, and

potential impacts of proposed policies. Levers include different responses to a policy such as

acceptance, compliance, non-compliance, and resistance. Last, outcomes refer to the effects,

results, or impacts of a policy intervention. Outcomes may include intended and unintended

results. To better understand Guided Pathways, this study explores these elements of policy

analysis to examine the relationship between Guided Pathways implementation and advancing

racial equity.

This study is focused on exploring the relationship between Guided Pathways

implementation and advancing racial equity in the context of a racialized organization. Aside

from policy analysis, racialized organization theory can support scholars interested in unpacking

how organizational practices that respond to policies like Guided Pathways can be understood

from a racialized perspective. Ray (2019) builds on Bonilla-Silva's (1997) colorblind racism theory to incorporate organizational theory and the social construction of race to examine how racism operates through organizational processes. This theory posits that race is fundamental to organizational foundations, processes and hierarchies. The theory of racialized organizations framed the analysis, findings, and recommendation of this study to move toward a more race-conscious approach to implementing Guided Pathways.

Advancing racial equity requires systemic changes that address institutionalized biases, promote inclusive policies, and empower marginalized communities to dismantle structural barriers and promote equitable outcomes (Felix, 2021). While this study does not conduct a critical analysis, it is informed by Critical Policy Analysis to question the assumptions about Guided Pathways as a tool to advance racial equity. Critical Policy Analysis examines how discourse, language, and text set the context for how policy problems and solutions are conceptualized and how and why particular issues come to be framed. Critical Policy Analysis acknowledges that policies need to be questioned because they are inevitably biased and filled with underlying assumptions about how to implement them effectively, and their ultimate impact on people's lives (Young & Diem, 2017). Diem et al., (2014) articulate that critical policy analysis can be used by researchers as a lens to examine the difference between the rhetoric of the policy and the reality of policy. By exploring how colleges are implementing Guided Pathways to advance racial equity, researchers and practitioners can examine how implementation may be addressing or reinforcing inequitable outcomes. Furthermore, understanding the challenges, if any, that faculty and administrators are facing while working to close racial equity gaps is crucial to understand what progress has been made and if colleges will be able to reach the goals articulated in *Vision 2030*.

Conclusion

Early reports on colleges implementing Guided Pathways show that implementation falls along a spectrum of adoption, from one of the pillars to all four (Bailey-Hofmann, 2019). The Completion by Design and the Loss Momentum Framework (LMF) was introduced to provide a structure for evaluating Guided Pathways implementation and to start a conversation around systemic change and increasing student completion. This comprehensive literature review reveals that efforts guided by various frameworks are attempting to evaluate implementations progress of Guided Pathways, yet there is a lack of coherence in these structures across the CCC, and how Guided Pathways is connected to advancing racial equity despite being framed as a racial equity tool by the California Community College's Chancellor's Office. Thus, this study is focused on exploring the relationship between Guided Pathways implementation and advancing racial equity.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The purpose of this qualitative multi-site case study was to explore the implementation of Guided Pathways at two California Community Colleges within a large urban community college district. Guided Pathways is a systemic reform movement focused on increasing community college completion rates and student achievement. Because Guided Pathways is a relatively new framework, few qualitative studies have examined its implementation at California Community Colleges, especially through the lens of increasing racial equity and facilitating systemic change. Therefore, this case study explores the experiences and perceptions of faculty and administrators at two colleges regarding how implementation is enabling the colleges to engage in Guided Pathways activities focused on increasing racially equitable student outcomes.

Research Questions

1. In what ways are two California Community Colleges implementing Guided Pathways?
   a. What have colleges done to implement pillar one: "Clarify the path"?
   b. What have colleges done to implement pillar two: "Help students choose and enter a path"?

2. In what ways are two California Community Colleges implementing Guided Pathways within the first two pillars to advance racial equity?
   a. What connections are colleges making between implementing Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity?
   b. How are faculty and administrators making sense of these in relation to their understanding of equity?

3. Within these two cases, what are faculty and administrators' challenges, if any, with

    advancing racial equity while implementing Guided Pathways?

Research Design and Rationale

I conducted a qualitative multi-site case study to explore how Guided Pathways was

being implemented at two California Community College's in a large urban district. Case studies

allow for the exploration of a phenomenon occurring at a particular site during a specific time

frame (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Utilizing two data collection methods, including

documentation review and qualitative interviews, I conducted an in-depth analysis of the case

sites (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Since colleges have begun implementing Guided Pathways,

they have collected quantitative data about persistence, student retention, completion, and equity

achievement gaps. In addition, the Scale of Adoption Assessment (SOAA) provides

opportunities for colleges to self-evaluate their progress on implementing key components of the

framework and report specific activities that support those areas. However, we lack information

about how faculty and administrators collaborate to implement activities that support pathways

implementation and activities that have been identified to reduce racial inequity. In addition, we

lack data about the challenges of the individuals responsible for supporting local implementation

efforts across community college districts with an emphasis on increasing racial equity. A

quantitative study would not have afforded me the opportunity to take a more holistic approach

to understand faculty and administrators' perceptions and experiences implementing Guided

Pathways to support their college's equity goals. However, a qualitative approach enabled a

more in-depth exploration of the experiences and reactions of faculty and administrators who are

responsible for supporting implementation.

Population and Sample

Site Selection

The district chosen for this study is one of the largest community college districts in California and in the United States based on enrollment and number of colleges. The district consists of nine colleges and enrolls over 200,000 full-time and part-time students annually. In addition to serving a large urban area, it serves a highly diverse population, and all nine colleges are designated as Hispanic Serving Institutions (Los Angeles Community College District [LACCD], 2021). In 2020, the district partnered with the National Center for Inquiry & Improvement (NCII) to establish design teams to support each college with their Guided Pathways implementation. That same year, the district also established a Framework for Racial Equity and Social Justice (LACCD, 2020). This framework identifies nine action step commitments to "actively build anti-racist organizational capacity and resilience and move forward towards more socially and racially-just academic programs…" (LACCD, 2020, p. 1). In the memo introducing the framework, the Chancellor states, the district will "use the Guided Pathways framework for action, measures, [and] follow-through on the identified action steps with annual reports to the community" (LACCD, 2020, p. 2). In addition to participating in annual SOAA and SEA plan reporting, this district is currently leveraging Guided Pathways implementation and its resources to close equity gaps and increase student completion. Therefore, I was interested in investigating how colleges within the district are implementing Guided Pathways to support their equity goals.

While all nine colleges in the district are implementing Guided Pathways, this study focused on two sites, chosen based on their student enrollment, institutional focus on racial equity, educational master plans, and their progress on Guided Pathways implementation. Case 1

is a smaller size college with just over 16,000 students, and Case 2 is a medium size college with around 29,000 enrollments—all as of spring 2023. Selecting two different sites that reflect various enrollment totals was important because enrollment trends impact funding, resources, and the scope of scaling implementation. While the sites are various sizes and may face similar and differing challenges based on their enrollment, both colleges explicitly mention racial equity in their mission statements, vision statements, and in their educational master plans and serve a sizeable student of color population (true of all nine LACCD colleges). Despite this, racial equity gaps continue to persist at these two sites. For example, according to each college's SEA plan, both campuses seek to eliminate achievement gaps and identify specific activities to address equity gaps. Despite this, both colleges continue identifying African American or Black and Hispanic or Latinx students as disproportionately impacted student groups across various success metrics in the SEA plan.

Case 1

The first college this study examined was Case 1. Case 1 recently updated its educational master plan to focus on Guided Pathways implementation. Both its SEA plan and educational master plan framework rely on Completion by Design and the Loss/Momentum Framework to plan and design specific activities that are focused on implementing Guided Pathways and increasing racial equity and student completion. In 2021, the college was named a top 150 U.S. community college by the Aspen Institute due to the progress it has made in increasing completion rates and racial equity. Yet the college still faced significant challenges in implementing pathways and reaching the goals outlined in the *Vision 2030.* Case 1 served as an example of how a college can implement pathways, make significant progress, and still face challenges in meeting its racial equity goals.

Case 2

The second college this study examined was Case 2. Case 2 was focused on implementing Guided Pathways to improve racially equitable outcomes. The college's educational master plan relies on the CCCCO *Vision for Success,* which influenced the creation of *Vision 2030* wherein Guided Pathways is designated as the framework for achieving these goals. In addition, the college is focused on "increasing completions through an innovational learner-centered environment and a culture of equity" and "developing an equity mindset" while implementing Guided Pathways. In 2020, the college reaffirmed their commitment to racial equity with the launch of an anti-racism task force in response to the uprising and racial reckoning happening across the nation during this time. The college recognized that being antiracist is an ongoing process and reified its commitment to work toward active and sustainable change.

Study Participants

The study participants consisted of college faculty and administrators who support Guided Pathways implementation and racial equity work at two California community colleges. Previous research has identified key influences and obstacles that face large community college district's implementing Guided Pathways by interviewing college presidents and academic senate presidents (Bailey-Hofmann, 2019). This research study seeks to expand on this previous research to examine the relationship between implementation and racial equity by interviewing additional key implementors. The purpose of the interviews was to collect information from individuals who have first-hand knowledge about the topic and community. These community experts provided a better understanding of the nature of a problem and gave insight into challenges facing colleges as they implement Guided Pathways. I interviewed the individuals

who are responsible for leading the implementation and have the most experience and knowledge about its progress. However, not all individuals who are responsible for supporting and advancing portions of the framework and racial equity work were explicitly associated with a college's Guided Pathway's team. Moreover, while racial equity is the responsibility of everyone at the college, key leaders are often championing this work throughout the college and may be focused explicitly on racial equity goals rather than Guided Pathways, even though both efforts are complementary and should be integrated. Therefore, I first conducted document analysis to identify lead implementors. Second, I interviewed the Guided Pathways administrative and faculty leaders and then through document review and preliminary interviews identified additional pathways and equity leaders across campus. Doing so provided an opportunity to triangulate the qualitative data.

Identifying and Recruiting Interview Participants.

To answer my first, second, and third research questions, I conducted 12 semi-structured qualitative interviews, six at each site. As stated above, these participants were purposely selected due to their role in implementation. I recruited them by sending out an e-mail to individuals I identified as key Guided Pathways leaders based on document review and from conversations with individuals at each case. All Case 1 participants agreed to participate during my initial outreach. Two potential Case 2 participants declined the opportunity to be interviewed based on their perceived knowledge of Guided Pathways at their campus but made suggestions of other individuals to contact. Below is a table introducing each participant, including a pseudonym to keep their identities confidential and their role at each college. Answers did not correlate to participant role. For example, not all faculty or administrators reported the same experiences and perceptions. Yet, general trends were identified within each case and

connections were made between them along with the data analysis from the document review.

Therefore, I report my findings in Chapter Four by theme and triangulate the data to convey the

findings of this study.

Table 1

Participants

Case 1 Participants		Case 2 Participants	
Participant Pseudonym	Role	Participant Pseudonym	Role
Avery	Previous GP Faculty Coordinator; Previous Academic Senate President, English Faculty	Diane	Previous GP Faculty Coordinator; Department Chair, Anthropology Faculty
Linda	Current GP Faculty Coordinator; Current Academic Senate President, Biology Faculty	Brandon	Current GP Faculty Coordinator; Learning Center Director
Evelyn	Current GP Administrator/ Dean, Student Services	Mary	Current GP Administrative, Anthropology Faculty
Christina	Previous GP Administrative Dean, Dean of Academic Affairs/ Teaching & Learning	Olivia	Dean, Institutional Effectiveness
Felipe	VP, Student Services	David	College President
Elyse	Acting VP, Academic Affairs, GP Administrator	Andy	VP, Academic Affairs

Data Collection

Document Review

I conducted a document review of major college planning documents, including the annually submitted Guided Pathways SOAAs from 2017-2022, the most recent Educational Master Plans (EMP), the most recent SEA plans, and the most recent Guided Pathways Workplans. For each college, I reviewed seven documents—fourteen documents in total.

The primary purpose of the SOAA is for colleges to reflect on their Guided Pathways journey and progress and to use it as a planning tool as colleges move forward with meeting their student success and equity goals. The college's EMP serves as the college's strategic planning document and sets the priorities for each college. The EMP articulates the objectives, measures, and related activities that support the college's goals within the context of achieving greater student success and equity. The SEA plan supports the SEA program, which requires colleges to implement the Guided Pathways framework by focusing on increasing student achievement measured by specific "success indicators" and requires each college to develop goals and metrics to address opportunity gaps based on disaggregated student data. The Guided Pathways Workplan, the newest version of the annual assessment plan submitted to the CCCCO, involves each college's Guided Pathways team reviewing their SEA plans, SOAAs, and other holistic student support efforts outlined in the EMP to identify which student populations are experiencing a disproportionate impact (DI) on the campus and align efforts with these student populations. Both cases identify Black and Latinx students as DI groups that experience racially inequitable outcomes. Reviewing these documents helped me answer my first and second research questions, which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Qualitative Interviews

     I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews of key Guided Pathways and equity informants at two sites within a district in order explore their experiences with Guided Pathways implementation. A draft of the questionnaire is provided in Appendix B. During the interviews, I hoped to learn more about how Guided Pathways implementation is supporting racial equity. To do so, this study relied on critical policy analysis as a conceptual framework and used this framework to develop the qualitative data collection instruments, including the interview protocol and questions. Guided Pathways is a top-down mandate and policy, and I was interested in critically examining the implementation of this policy to understand the relationship between Guided Pathways and the goals articulated in the CCCCO *Vision 2030*, which calls upon all community colleges to achieve racial equity and implement the Guided Pathways framework as a tool to achieve this goal. Since top-down policies reforms may reinforce inequitable power dynamics, dominate ideologies, and perpetuate institutional racism, this study also relied on critical race theory and equity-mindedness in instrument creation and data analysis. The interview questions for this study were constructed to better understand if the activities that colleges are implementing to scale Guided Pathways have led to activities that support increased racial equity. In addition, the interview was focused on examining faculty and administrators' perceptions of Guided Pathways implementation on advancing racial equity.

     I conducted interviews remotely via Zoom to allow for flexibility when scheduling interviews with participants. Interviews were conducted via Zoom because during the COVID-19 pandemic, as all colleges have been using Zoom to host their Guided Pathways meetings and using Zoom and e-mail as the main method of communicating while implementing the framework. These interviews were recorded via Zoom, and I also recorded audio via my

password protected smartphone to have a backup of the audio. Once I received the files from Zoom, I deleted the video files and saved the audio files on a password protected iCloud account that requires two-step verification to maintain confidentiality. I also uploaded the smartphone recordings to the iCloud account and deleted the files from the smartphone once uploaded. Then, I used a transcription service to transcribe the interviews to allow for an in-depth analysis of the participants perceptions and experiences.

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Data Analyses

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Document Analysis

Prior to interviews, I analyzed Guided Pathways and equity related college documents including Educational Master Plans, SEA plans, Guided Pathways SOAAs and Guided Pathways Workplans, beginning in Fall 2017. I systematically conducted line by line coding to identify the specific activities that colleges are doing to implement Guided Pathways. In addition, I examined if and how these activities are related to their equity goals established in their SEA plan, Guided Pathways SOAA, and Guided Pathways Workplan.

Evaluating Guided Pathways implementation from a critical policy analysis perspective requires an examination of the policy's origins, the problems it was intended to address, the development of the program over time, as well as identifying who the policy benefits, who may be disadvantaged by the policy, and its potential effects and consequences (Ching et al., 2020; Young & Diem, 2017). Previous studies and current Guided Pathways literature has addressed the origins of Guided Pathways as a framework to increase equity and student completion. In a similar vein, this study emphasizes on how current implementation is connected to achieving greater racial equity. To discern whether Guided Pathways, at its current implementation, can be used as a tool for racial equity, I consider the aforementioned documents to better contextualize

the history and evolution of Guided Pathways implementation at both colleges. While evaluating these documents, I examined whether, and in what ways, documents reflected a connection between Guided Pathways implementation and advancing racial equity. To do so, I looked for emerging themes to identify categories to use for further analysis. Through multiple careful readings and coding of the data, I developed a deeper consideration for the way in which these documents showcased how colleges are taking part in implementation. Once I reviewed all of the documents, I reflected on the findings and revise my interview questions to ensure they address key themes.

Interviews

I used the audio recordings to transcribe the 60-minute interview from each participant and looked for themes based on each research question. While document review provides important context and background information, qualitative interviews excel at capturing individual experiences, nuanced perspectives, and uncovering tacit knowledge (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In addition, interviews allow researchers to explore the subjective experiences, perspectives and motions of individuals that may also be influencing implementation. This can provide deeper insights in the thoughts, beliefs, values, and motivations, which may not be captured in college documents. By combining both methods, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of a topic, leveraging the strengths of each approach.

When I engaged in the first round of coding to analyze the interview data, I used structural codes that were deductively related to the existing literature, my conceptual framework, my research questions, the perceptions of Guided Pathways implementation, and the challenges to implementation related to the equity goals. Structural codes acted as labeling and indexing devices, allowing me to quickly organize and "access data likely to be relevant to a

particular analysis from a larger data set" (Namey et al., 2008, as cited in Saldaña, 2013).

Examples of first round structural codes include pillar one, pillar two, and elements of Guided

Pathways, such as mapping. For the second round of coding, I used more inductive open coding

based on what arose in the interview responses; the open codes could include surprising codes,

ones that were not anticipated prior to the study, or codes of unusual or conceptual interest

(Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Examples of second round coding included observations, such as

leadership dynamics and silos. In the third cycle of coding, I engaged in pattern coding. Pattern

coding enabled me to group my second-round coding summaries and memos into smaller sets,

themes, and constructs (Saldaña, 2013), and this helped me develop my findings. Examples of

third round coding included racial equity as a process and racial equity as an outcome. Overall,

multiple levels of coding allowed for deep analysis and rich data leading to significant research

findings.

Ethical Considerations

My primary ethical concern was to do no harm to my participants while collecting data.

Participants who are being interviewed may feel vulnerable when discussing issues around

Guided Pathways implementation and racial equity because they may feel very close to the work

and responsible for the progress, or lack thereof, being made at their colleges. Furthermore,

because I am employed within the community college district I am studying, participants may

feel concerned about being honest about the challenges they face. Therefore, when contacting

potential interview respondents, I stressed my role as a graduate researcher conducting objective

research to learn more about their experiences and perceptions. In addition, I explained that

responses will be summarized and presented in ways that do not identify participants.

Furthermore, I was careful of my language choices, facial expressions, and body language while

conducting interviews to increase their sense of comfort. I also committed to protecting participants confidentiality by removing any identifying markers. In addition, the interview recordings and transcripts were hosted on a password protected computer and backed up on a password protected cloud account that requires two-factor authentication to access the files. Finally, I obtained informed consent from all participants before their involvement in the study to clearly explain the purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their rights as participants.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Bias and participant reactivity are two threats to the credibility and data collection of my study. To ensure the credibility of my study, I first examined my own biases and judgements about Guided Pathways implementation. Since I have been involved in implementation at my college, I suspended my own judgements about its impact on racial equity. To correct for bias, I relied on rich data and direct quotations to support my conclusions rather than my own personal experiences. I also used a standardized protocol and coding procedure to participate in an independent analysis of my interviews. Using a standardized process ensured that my data was accurate and allowed me to identify common themes across each interview. Knowing that participants might have been tempted to tell me what they think I want to hear, I stressed that they can help move this work forward best by being completely candid about the challenges they have faced.

Positionality

As a faculty member who is responsible for Guided Pathways implementation who has also served as an administrator in my district, I am cognizant of my positionality and how my various roles could influence this study. Therefore, I clearly stated that participation in this study

was completely voluntary and confidential. I also carefully positioned myself as a graduate student at UCLA rather than as a colleague. In addition, I was never a supervisor of any of the participants. Since individuals expressed interest in applying findings to support future implementation across the district, I plan to disseminate the summary report of my findings to each college across all sites to prevent the identification of the two participating colleges.

Conclusion

This study is focused on understanding the relationship between Guided Pathways implementation and racial equity while addressing the problem of low and inequitable completion rates among community college students. The first chapter emphasized the importance of investigating Guided Pathways as a framework to address these issues and advance the CCCCO's *Vision 2030,* while the second chapter engaged in a comprehensive literature review on Guided Pathways and equity within California community colleges. Chapter 3 offered the methodological approach of this study used to address the research questions. By leveraging a qualitative research design, this study resolves to provide new insights into the relationship between Guided Pathways and achieving racially equitable completion rates among community college students. The findings from this research aim to advance the existing body of knowledge on Guided Pathways and inform policy and practice in community colleges to promote increased student success and equity.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative multi-site case study was to examine the implementation of Guided Pathways at two California Community Colleges within a large urban community college district. Specifically, this study explored the experiences and perceptions of faculty and administrators regarding how colleges are implementing Guided Pathways to advance racial equity. Two data collection methods, document review and qualitative interviews, were used to address the following research questions:

1. In what ways are two California Community Colleges implementing Guided Pathways?

   a. What have colleges done to implement pillar one: "Clarify the path"?

   b. What have colleges done to implement pillar two: "Help students choose and enter a path"?

2. In what ways are two California Community Colleges implementing Guided Pathways within the first two pillars to advance racial equity?

   a. What connections are colleges making between implementing Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity?

   b. How are faculty and administrators making sense of these in relation to their understanding of equity?

3. Within these two cases, what are faculty and administrators' challenges, if any, with advancing racial equity while implementing Guided Pathways?

This chapter presents the study's findings and discusses the results in the context of its conceptual and theoretical framework.

Case 1 Context

Case 1 is a mid-sized community college in a large urban CC district in southern

California. The campus boasts an enrollment of around 10,000 students, 105 full-time faculty

members, 18 administrators, and 165 classified staff, and, in the 2021-2022 academic year,

awarded 2,902 degrees and certificates. In the fall of 2020, 48% of students identified as Latinx,

and 20% identified as Black. This case had the largest percentage of Black students in its district,

and 80% of students identified as students of color or from two or more races. This case was also

designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution.

While the case had a large percentage of students of color, enrollment trends among

various racial/ethnic groups varied. From Fall 2015 to Fall 2020, there was an increase in the

percentage of Latinx students enrolled in credit courses, going from 42% to 48%. In the same

timeframe, there was a decrease in the percentage of Black students enrolled in credit courses,

going from 29% to 20%. The percentage of other racial/ethnic groups largely remained stable.

Aside from enrollment trends, this case also saw changes in course success rates, especially

among students of color.

California community colleges measure student course completion rates by tracking the

percentage of enrolled students who successfully finish and receive a passing grade in a

particular course. Case 1 has seen an upward trend in course success rates since the Fall of 2015.

The college reported 69% course success rates in Fall 2020. Yet, success rates for Black and

Latinx students trended lower than students that fall into other racial/ethnic groups. Course

success rates of Black students were 58% and Latinx students were 68% in Fall 2020 compared

to 84% for Asian students and 83% for white students. Yet, the number of degrees and

certificates earned by students had been steadily increasing since the 2016-2017 academic year.

While the college continued to work toward increasing student success rates, it also navigated remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This case known to be a leader in online education, and in response to the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the college was able to pivot to remote learning quickly and successfully.

In campus-wide college documents, this case "acknowledges that students, staff, faculty, and community have witnessed many historic events, including a devastating global health pandemic, horrific examples of continued social and racial injustices, and an accelerating climate crisis." In response to this context, the college revised its mission statement to make explicit commitments to "student success, racial equity, social justice, and environmental responsibility." The college's commitment to be a more inclusive, equitable institution has led to two new social justice studies degrees, multiple LGBTQ+ trainings, a Black Scholars United program, expanding basic needs initiatives, and various professional development opportunities focused on anti-racism, social justice, and equity. In addition to these racial equity initiatives, the college implemented Guided Pathways.

The college began Guided Pathways implementation in 2017 and had progressed into the mid-stages of implementation by the time data were collected in 2023. At the time of data collection, the most recent SOAA (2020-2021) identified four essential practices "at scale" and seven essential practices as "scaling in progress." Within this college's Educational Master Plan, there was a specific focus on connecting the Guided Pathways framework to specific strategies and actions that could improve the success rates of Black students and explicitly stated a "strong commitment to decreasing equity gaps." This study examined planning documents and qualitative interview data to understand the connection between Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity in this case.

Case 2 Context

Case 2 is a mid-sized community college in the same large urban CC district in southern California. The college had 701 full and part-time faculty, 207 classified professionals, and 13 administrators. In addition, at the time of this study, the college served nearly 16,000 students, and its diverse student body is reflected by its surrounding communities. For example, the local service area has a high percentage of Latinx communities, and the college is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution. The proportion of students identified as Latinx was around 40%, and 5% of students identified as Black. Seventy percent of students identified as students of color or from two or more races. The college's mission statement focused on equity and inclusion to ensure that the needs of disproportionately impacted students were met and that they felt valued and connected to the college community. This commitment stemmed from acknowledging racial equity gaps exist among success and retention rates.

At Case 2, course success was on an upward trend since fall of 2015. The college reported 73% course success rates and 88% course retention rates. Yet, success rates for Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Black, and Latinx students trended lower than students that fell into other racial/ethnic groups. Course success rates of Black and Latinx students were 67% in Fall 2020 compared to 78% for Asian students and 81% for white students. Nevertheless, the number of degrees and certificates earned by students of color has steadily increased since the 2016-2017 academic year. In the 2020-2021 academic year, 2197 associate degrees were awarded. To support student completion and advance racial equity, the college was also implementing Guided Pathways and communicated its commitment to racial equity via its anti-racism action plan.

In recent years, Case 2 pursued significant initiatives to enhance student outcomes and promote equity on campus. One pivotal development was the implementation of Guided

Pathways. The vision for implementing Guided Pathways at Case 2 represented a student-centered approach aimed at streamlining academic pathways, clarifying program requirements, and providing comprehensive support services to help students achieve their educational goals efficiently. Implementing this framework aimed to help students navigate their academic journey with more clarity and purpose, ultimately leading to improved retention and completion rates. This case has also actively advanced racial equity within its campus community. Recognizing the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive environment for all students, faculty, and staff, the college has implemented various initiatives to address systemic barriers and promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. What follows is an analysis of the data organized by research question and major themes.

Implementing the First Pillar of the Guided Pathways Framework

My first research question is concerned with how two California Community College's implement Guided Pathways. The first sub-question of RQ 1 asks what colleges have done to implement pillar one of Guided Pathways: "Clarify the path." Both cases implemented pillar one by responding to a call for change, identifying meta-majors, and mapping the path for students. What follows is a detailed explanation of these priorities from the experiences and perceptions of this study's participants.

Responding to a Call for Change

One of the most crucial components of beginning any initiative focused on organizational transformation is building a strong leadership team (Judkins et al., 2019). Bonds (2022) argues that rather than responding to a mandate, advancing racial equity while implementing Guided Pathways must involve bringing together change agents who have a conviction for the cause and are willing and able to foster a collective movement across the

college. Still, both cases described assorted challenges while establishing their team. First, I will describe the experiences faculty and staff leaders described when beginning Guided Pathways implementation and establishing their leadership team. Then, I will compare these findings to identify similarities and differences among both sites. I conclude this section with key findings that articulate how each case addressed a state-wide mandate, navigated initiative fatigue, and attempted to establish a collective commitment to implement the Guided Pathways framework.

Guided Pathways implementation at Case 1 began with an invitation for campus leaders to attend a conference in San Diego where the *Vision for Success* was laid out and colleges were clustered by districts and geographic areas and encouraged to brainstorm how to begin their work. One faculty participant, Avery, shared, "No one was really clear on what the deliverables were at that point, but it was clear that there was a lot of money behind it and that it was not negotiable that all colleges were expected to participate." Avery was Senate President at the time and later became one of the founding Guided Pathways faculty coordinators. She elaborated that she left the conference with the understanding, "we better do this." She explained that "what was unique about the Guided Pathways initiative was that it was essentially a mandate from the state, "They didn't say that at the beginning, but later, they did formalize it." An administrator at Case 1, Evelyn, who eventually became one of the administrative coordinators overseeing Guided Pathways shared, "I don't get the sense or the feel that it was ever really about institutional change. It was more compliance and making sure that whatever the timelines were for implementation, there was a sufficient priority to get us compliant." This initial framing of Guided Pathways as a mandate focused on compliance caused skepticism across the college when working to establish a leadership

team and committee while communicating the significance of the work. Moreover, the ways in which the initial leadership team was established had an impact on how Case 1 made connections between Guided Pathways and institutional transformation.

Once the work began at Case 1, participants recalled that pillar one of Guided Pathways was perceived to be mostly faculty-driven due to the curricular aspects of creating academic pathways. Avery shared that the senior administrators were willing to take a step back and say, "Pull us in when you guys get the pathways together; when faculty get the pathways codified." Nevertheless, challenges with getting faculty buy-in occurred. There was "a lot of skepticism," due to the many initiatives established by the CCCCO and the "fair degree of healthy skepticism among faculty." Another faculty coordinator, Linda, who took over the position after Avery shared, "I don't think anybody's ever sat down and said, 'Look, this is what we want to do.'" Furthermore, Linda shared, "You got to have buy-in from the administration… I think there are some administrators who still are not 100% on board, or just kind of look at Guided Pathways, like, 'Yeah, whatever. Okay, whatever.'" While faculty were empowered to begin the work of Guided Pathways, administrators communicated uncertainty with the process.

When administrators at Case 1 were asked to explain the beginning of the Guided Pathways implementation, there seemed to be less clarity about how it began and skepticism about what the college had accomplished. For example, Evelyn explained, "if speaking bluntly, I don't think we are in Guided Pathways. I think we have Guided Pathways information on our websites, in some brochures, but I wouldn't say that we are a school that has fully implemented Guided Pathways." Felipe, a senior administrator at Case 1 shared, "We struggle with the implementation at this point because I think we haven't had the right

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people involved from the beginning." Overall, there seemed to be confusion and a lack of clarity on who would be responsible for implementing Guided Pathways, who should be involved, and how to navigate implementation from faculty and administrative perspectives. While Case 1 was focused on fostering a faculty-driven approach to implementation and responding to Guided Pathways as a mandate, Case 2 focused on relying on strong relationships between faculty and administration and connecting Guided Pathways to previous successful initiatives.

Guided Pathways implementation at Case 2 began by overcoming initiative fatigue, identifying early wins, and bringing people together, including faculty and administrators, to see Guided Pathways as more than a top-down mandate. While many Case 2 participants struggled to recall how they began implementing Guided Pathways, they mentioned several key lessons. For example, Mary, the current faculty coordinator, remembered looking beyond the state mandate to overcome initiative fatigue. She explained that one challenge was framing implementation at the beginning before diving deep into the work. Since colleges have been exposed to so many initiatives, many faculty and administrators could perceive Guided Pathways as one more thing to do. She shared common hesitations as, "Here's one more thing and is this really going to matter? We're going to put all this effort into it. Are we just checking the boxes? Are we going to get anything out of it?" Mary explained that this hesitation typically occurs when "it comes down from the state, and it's not coming up from the bottom organically." So, Case 2 spent a lot of time explaining why this would be worth people's time before diving right into implementing pillar one of Guided Pathways. Mary explained the importance of "convincing people that it's not going to be 'Oh, we're going to do this because the state's making us' and then poof, it's another initiative that's going to be

here and gone, and our work will be for nothing." To address this concern, a small group of trusted faculty members came together to build more relationships around Guided Pathways work that stemmed from previous trust and experiences from other relationships. Brandon, another current faculty coordinator, shared, "They were well-respected by their colleagues, and we all have relationships with the Academic Senate and other aspects of faculty leadership." Conversations with trusted colleagues helped address the skepticism some felt about beginning this work.

Aside from addressing skepticism that some may have felt when being introduced to the framework, Mary also shared how the leadership team emphasized previous successes from similar incentives and strong relationships with the administration. Mary answered:

It wasn't as though we were starting from scratch, and it wasn't as though people didn't know who we were. We'd been working on stuff with the college for years. And so, I think, I don't know, I think that there was trust with the faculty as far as doing the work. We had good relationships, always have had it with administration as well with senior staff. So, that's definitely been a helpful component to it too.

The focus was on strong relationships, trust, and a long history of success while establishing the leadership team at Case 2. Mary's colleague Brandon shared how their college focused on early wins to motivate faculty, especially since many colleagues were feeling initiative fatigue. Brandon stated:

I think once my team was involved, our group, I think it was more trying to have some early wins and be able to say, "We will make this happen. Look, we did this. You wanted a welcome center; we have a welcome center. We figured out the money, we figured out the way to do it."

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While both cases began implementing pillar one by creating the Guided Pathways team, there were differences in how they framed this work. While focusing on compliance ensured that Case 1 responded to a state-wide mandate, connecting previous successful initiatives allowed Case 2 to call change agents into action by creating a stronger conviction for the policy implementation. In addition, collaborating with administration early on allowed for more clarity and buy-in among key stakeholders at Case 2 and less confusion among faculty and administrators. Ultimately, how each college responded to the call for change via Guided Pathways implementation influenced each case's progress with implementing the pillar one. After each case established a Guided Pathways team, both cases focused on creating meta-majors.

Creating Career and Academic Pathways

Pillar one of Guided Pathways is focused on clarifying the path for students, which involves ensuring that students have access to information about the programs and support services offered by the college. Defining meta-majors, now known as Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs) in both cases, was the immediate focus. Both cases took an inclusive approach committed to getting input from students, faculty, staff, and administrators. This early pivot led to a full-scale implementation of CAPs. Both cases were also rapid adopters of Program Mapper technology and attempted to make connections between racial equity and CAPs. However, Case 2 communicated more success with institutionalizing Program Mapper, building community and culture around CAPs, and working to connect CAPs to best align with one of their nearby four-year universities. In addition, Case 2 participants communicated a sense of pride around implementing this work.

Conversely, Case 1 participants discussed the need to overcome resistance, skepticism, fear, and anxiety. Yet, Case 1 participants discussed clear connections between CAPs, Program

Mapper, and racial equity while acknowledging that more work needs to be done to address racial equity gaps. In this next section, I describe how each case established CAPs and then discuss their similarities and differences.

After establishing its leadership team and guiding principles and introducing the framework to the broader campus community, Case 1 began to collect data from students, faculty, staff, and administrators to establish their CAPs. Avery, the faculty coordinator at the time, shared they conducted student focus groups and, "collected data from students about the names of pathways and things like that to make sure that stuff was going to make sense to them." Evelyn shared that they also engaged in "card sorts," an "activity that began several years ago where not just faculty, but students were brought in to help us take a look at all our programs, and figure out, from a student perspective, what seemed to go together." Christina, the founding administrative coordinator supporting Guided Pathways, recalled:

> We engaged in a lot of work in that. We did summer work, sorting activities with
> students, and it was on a big, large faculty flex day, opening day. We had the Office of
> Institutional Effectiveness engage in qualitative data software, which was basically
> sorting software. They took all the data from the sorts and helped figure out what were
> the best groupings.

While Case 1 took an inclusive approach to gathering data about how to create CAPs, faculty and counselors expressed resistance, skepticism, fear, and anxiety about the process.

Faculty resistance at Case 1 to creating meta majors and Guided Pathways stemmed from concerns about autonomy, traditional academic structures, loss of specialization, additional workload, resistance to change, uncertainty about effectiveness, and lack of involvement in decision-making. Evelyn shared, "Initially, the many challenges were the wider faculty reception

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of pathways, a lot of skepticism." Avery agreed, "The main sticking point or fear was that folks

would lose access to their boutique courses." There was skepticism and fear around what might

happen to faculty who taught niche or boutique classes that may not fit clearly into a CAP and

how faculty and the college might have to go about curriculum design differently than in the

past. Issues like how the college would schedule classes, what times of days the classes would be

offered, and what classes would not be offered caused concern. While at a conference focused on

Guided Pathways, Christina recalled that the CAPs that were created after months of listening

tours and collaboration were not initially approved by the college's Academic Senate. She

explicated:

> It felt like a blow to me, and I'm sure for the team because after engaging in all that
>
> work, we were finally coming to the college with a product of something that we had
>
> worked on, and they weren't ready for it. So that was a learning moment.

While faculty expressed concerns about the CAPs and how they would impact the status quo,

faculty leaders at Case 1 were also focused on making connections between advancing equity

and implementing CAPs at their college.

While CAPs were designed to provide a structured framework for students to navigate

through their academic journey more effectively, they were also designed to improve student

success and completion. Several Case 1 participants also made connections between the creation

of CAPs and advancing racial equity. For example. Avery explained, "There is research that

shows that for Black students, they benefit from completing math and English in the first year."

In fact, all students can benefit from completing these gateway courses during their first

academic year, but Avery stated that, "as a team, we had equity in mind early on in our

conversation around pathways," despite "equity being an add- on" during early SOAA reports to

the state. This idea of equity being an add-on comes from the fact that early Guided Pathways assessment tools did not explicitly ask how implementation was advancing equity, even though it was part of the framework. As the SOAA evolved and included equity considerations, this fostered equity conversations among the leadership team. Yet, these conversations did not fully reach all areas of the college, especially because of early skepticism about CAP implementation. Interview data suggested that although the creation of CAPs could help support the college's racial equity goals, the conversations about equity were siloed and were mainly among the small team in charge of leading implementation. While Case 1 seemed more equity-focused than Case 2 at the beginning of CAP creation, Case 2 was able to institutionalize its CAPs and made more progress in connecting CAPs to specific racial equity initiatives to improve student outcomes.

Case 2 participants also shared that creating CAPs was an early priority for implementing Guided Pathways. Even so, they reported being able to institutionalize their efforts and were able to build more community and culture around their CAPs. For example, Diane, a previous Guided Pathways coordinator, shared, "I think our faculty had a lot of buy-in with program mapping. They got it and understood it." She shared how conversations about CAPs also provided opportunities to build community and open lines of communication among faculty and students. When asked to clarify why faculty may have bought into the CAPs early on, Diane explained, "I think it's tangible. They know their program and they know their courses… So, I think in their sense, they saw it as a great tool to both advertise their programs, clarify what their program was about, and give advice to students." These sentiments were noticeably different than the skepticism Case 1 faculty seemed to experience. The difference may be because of the early collaboration and relationship development that was fostered prior to implementing pillar one

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and creating the CAPs. Strong relationships, trust, and early commitment to the work allowed for more progress to be made while creating the CAPs at Case 2.

Mapping the Path

Once CAPs were created, both cases adopted software called Program Mapper, a detailed visual course guide of core, general, elective, and developmental courses by term, along with their prerequisites. Program Mapper was designed to support the pillar one of Guided Pathways by providing a structured and visual framework that helps students understand their academic journey, make informed decisions about their goals, and stay on track toward successfully completing their chosen program. All participants identified Program Mapper as an activity that supports the pillar one. In this next section, I explain how each case engaged in mapping CAPs and the various challenges and opportunities shared by participants.

Case 1 was an early adopter of the Program Mapper software that would later be scaled across California to support mapping CAPs and provide students with information about what classes they should take each semester to complete their educational goals. One Case 1 faculty member shared that she thought that Guided Pathways was Program Mapper for students. Linda states, "Students are just like, 'Yeah, Guided Pathways is Program Mapper. How do I use Program Mapper to get a degree and get in or transfer?' Students are very, very pragmatic about it." From Linda's experience, students were not familiar with Guided Pathways as a framework, but they were familiar with Program Mapper and employing it to learn more about planning their educational pathway. Just the same, Case 1 experienced challenges with adopting the software.

Difficulty navigating Program Mapper impacted how Guided Pathways would be implemented over time especially due to the software limitations and need to be constantly updated. Avery disclosed:

Unfortunately, the mapper is not regularly updated as many of these initiatives we get from the state aren't funded for the life of the item… So, it's not super updated, but it still serves as a tool to give students a general idea like, "Oh, okay, if I'm going to major in English, I probably don't need to take calculus. It's probably okay to take stats." That kind of thing.

Several Case 1 participants echoed issues with Program Mapper and the college catalog being accurately updated but shared that the college was working to fix the problems. Likewise, Elyse, the current academic administrator supporting Guided Pathways at Case 1, shared:

I think we created these pathways, but we didn't put the true structures in place. For instance, the catalog was incorrect, there was a lot of things missing from it. The Program Mapper that we had was incorrect because it followed other resources that were incorrect. And so, although we had these things there for the students, nobody stopped to look at, how do we make this student friendly and how do we correct it all? And it took some time for us to come to the realization that these things needed to be fixed in order for students to be able to be successful. And so, I think we missed a little bit of things here and there, but we did get back on it and we fixed it.

Another challenge shared by Christina, a previous academic coordinator at Case 1, was being limited to the software. She explained:

I think a misstep or if I look back, what I would've done differently is not be beholden to

the software… I think that being beholden to the software inhibited some of the upkeep

and the maintenance of the maps, which honestly really makes them obsolete very fast.

And, while these Program Maps attempted to clarify the path for students, racial equity was not

centralized in their creation, communication, or implementation for students. Christina

continued:

> I know your research is also about Guided Pathways and equity work, and I guess I will
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> also say that I think that connection is lacking. I feel like maybe equity was one of our
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> principles, but I don't know if our team knew what that meant or looked like in practice.
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> We had talked about, well, if we make maps, we should make maps for all types of our
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> students, our part-time students, our evening students, our online students. Are we
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> serving the student population we have? We never got there, but it was a great idea, and I
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> don't know if we didn't get there because of the software, it was such a lift to do the first
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> round of maps that to get to making them disaggregated for our equity groups, we didn't
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> get there. So, I feel like there's an intention about equity in Guided Pathways work, but I
>
> don't know if there was a concerted effort of integration of equity into our Guided
>
> Pathways work.

While Case 1 faced challenges with implementing Program Mapper, Case 2 reported more

success with institutionalizing its mapping process.

Case 2 was also an early adopter of Program Mapper. David, the college president of

Case 2 shared, "Well, certainly the Program Mapper effort was huge in clarifying the path."

Diane, previous faculty coordinator also from Case 2, elaborated:

We adopted Program Mapper so that we have a tool to organize our CAPs and the majors

underneath the CAPs, and then all of our departments and all of our program maps that

students can see the suggested guideline of what you take each semester.

Case 2 was able to institutionalize Program Mapper by ensuring the work was happening among

more than those explicitly in charge of leading Guided Pathways reform efforts. Diane

illustrates:

We were one of the early adopters of Program Mapper, so getting everything mapped out

was one of our successes and something that truly got institutionalized because it is not a

Guided Pathways thing anymore, meaning the Guided Pathways navigators are not very

involved. It's completely owned by Academic Affairs and the curriculum committee and

has been very institutionalized in that sense.

In addition to mapping programs, Case 2 was also able to partner with a four-year college to

align their lower-division maps with upper-division transfer coursework that students would be

exposed to after they completed their two-year degree. While participants expressed challenges

with this collaboration, their ability to move past local mapping emphasizes how they built off

the initial program mapping that both cases completed.

Aside from being able to make these larger connections, Diane expressed that "faculty

have a lot of buy-in with the program mapping, too, that seems really tangible that they get it and

understand it." She also shared that these program maps are, "improving the communication

between the student and the counseling and faculty staff folks who are working in the CAPs,

building community, but also opening lines of communication, helping students identify with

their CAP." Diane also shared how program mapping at Case 2 was focused on helping students

gain, "cultural capital," by demystifying the educational planning process and helping students

with "feeling belonging and connected," to their educational journey. Notably, Case 2 reported a closer affinity between mapping programs and working toward creating more equitable outcomes for students. Diane shared, "I think a challenge is to ensure that equity isn't tacked on as an afterthought to plans." Olivia, the Dean of Institutional Effectiveness, echoed, "So, we're trying to reorganize things… how we display things, making pathways part of the culture… so students can start to identify with the CAP, as I think, sort of a community and create a sense of belonging." Based on the participants' interviews from Case 2, building community and belonging was an important goal alongside the mapping of programs and implementing CAPs for their students.

Overall, responding to the call for change, creating Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs), and mapping the pathways were the three main activities that both colleges pursued while implementing pillar one of Guided Pathways. Before I make a deeper connection between these activities and advancing racial equity, I discuss how both cases implemented pillar two of the Guided Pathways framework.

Implementing the Second Pillar of Guided Pathways Framework

The second sub-question of RQ1 is focused on pillar two: "Helping students choose and enter a path." Both cases implemented pillar two by launching Student Success and Completion Teams and expanding student success practices employed by affinity programs. However, both cases articulated less progress with pillar two than with pillar one. In addition, as discussed by participants, the implementation of pillar two provides insights into how colleges navigate working across silos and the institutional challenges they face to support greater racial equity. In this next section, I discuss how each case addressed Student Success and Completion Teams as well as how they expanded resources, programs, and services, particularly for students of color,

with the intention of advancing racial equity. I also highlight the differences between how these findings are discussed within the planning documents analyzed during document review versus the experiences and perceptions of the individuals supporting implementation.

Student Success and Completion Teams

Student Success and Completion Teams are cross-functional academic and student services teams that collaborate to support students' holistic needs as they pursue their career and academic pathways. Throughout California, several community colleges have launched various versions of these teams while implementing Guided Pathways. Team members can include financial aid advisors, faculty instructional leads, counselors, peer mentors, data coaches, and basic need and/or student support service specialists. Both cases identified launching Student Success and Completion Teams in major planning documents and during participant interviews as a focus for implementing the pillar two of Guided Pathways. In this next section, I discuss how each case articulated its version of Student Success and Completion Teams, the challenges they faced with implementation, and how they relate their findings to racial equity.

In the most recent Educational Master Plan (EMP) of Case 1, Student Success Teams are mentioned seven times. The college established a goal of launching Student Success Teams cross-listing it as an explicit strategy to couple it with the pursuit of equity. Specifically, the EMP states that the teams were meant to connect students to resources. Christina noted, "I think there was a theory about how Student Success Teams could help support students into this caseload of their pathway, but a mismatch with how to actually staff those teams sustainably for the college." Avery recalled:

I've had a lot of discussions with folks… conceptualizing what our success team would

be, who would be the right sets of people to be on that, and what would that look like in

terms of an entrance or an onboarding process for students.

Evelyn, another administrative coordinator at Case 1 echoed Christina's comments about having,

"a lot of discussions with folks." Yet, Linda, the current faculty coordinator at Case 1 described

how the idea of Student Success Teams was never fully actualized. Linda described:

The idea was to put a counselor with [the] success team to bring in student success

coaches. These were students that would work in the Welcome Center. They would be

the primary point of contact for the students. They could answer questions. And then

there was a student success faculty representative, or sorry, an administrator

representative, which was our classified staff.

That was the idea. The implementation was they got leads. The counseling portion

of the team never came to fruition. The student success coach worked for a little bit until

the students graduated… They were graduate students usually in counseling. They got

their degrees and they left, and we were left with a big hole in that aspect. And I don't

think our classified staff even know what they're supposed to do with Guided Pathways.

I don't think anybody's ever sat down and said, "Look, this is what we want you

to do." And even if we did, they're busy enough without having to do stuff for us. So, I

think that was the way it implemented. I'm not convinced that's the model that's going to

keep us going forward because we only have half of that model. The other half fell apart

and it's just difficult to get it going. So, that was the previous iteration, not quite sure

what the iteration's going to look like now.

Linda's comments highlighted that while the Student Success Teams were listed as a strategy to support student success and equity in the college's EMP, the college struggled with the implementation of the teams and creating a sustainable framework. While four out of six participants from Case 1 also described Student Success Teams as a priority for implementing Guided Pathways and supporting equity, they shared that the challenge with launching these teams is treating the teams as an add-on rather than institutionalizing them. For example, Felipe, an administrator at Case 1, shared, "We all have to be Guided Pathways. It can't just be, 'Well, this group over here is working on Guided Pathways. Good luck with that.' No, we all have to be Guided Pathways." Although launching Student Success Teams was an explicit equity priority for Case 1, participants expressed concerns and challenges with implementing the framework and an inability to scale the teams across the college. Ultimately, Student Success Teams were not launched despite identifying them as an important goal in the College's EMP and Quality Focus Essay associated with their self-evaluation report to reaffirm the college's accreditation.

Case 2 shared more success with their launch. Case 2 used the term Completion Teams and identified creating a Completion Team for each CAP as an activity for their first EMP goal of increasing "completions through an innovational learner-centered environment and a culture of equity." Case 2 also identified the creation of these teams as a goal that supports equity at their college. Participants also made connections between these teams and the pillar two of Guided Pathways.

While launching Completion Teams, Case 2 made connections between Guided Pathways and advancing equity. For example, David, the college president of Case 2, shared:

> The Completion Teams that we've developed [include] making sure that they're
> approaching their work with an equity lens, looking for disproportionate impact, looking

for structures and processes that are leading to inequities, looking for ways that we can make sure that we're supporting all groups of our students to be successful within the different Career and Academic pathways.

Case 2 focused on modeling successful practices adopted by affinity programs focused on advancing equity for specific groups of students and designing their teams to adopt these best practices at scale. Mary, one of the Case 2 faculty coordinators, described, "… as we designed the seven pathways, the seven CAPs, we also designed and implemented Completion Teams to support each of those CAPs." These Completion Teams are staffed with a dedicated counselor, faculty from the discipline area, an administrator, and unclassified paid interns. Mary explained once the Completion Teams were designed, the college realized that these teams could serve students more effectively. She shared:

Then the idea becomes, okay, we have a Completion Team for each of the CAPs, and that Completion Team has four or five people on it. And when we look at the CAP by students, now we're talking about a student population of not 15,000, but of 800, 1200, 1500, 2000 for maybe one of the bigger CAPs. And so, then through that kind of structure, we start to have the opportunity to model more after what we see in those affinity programs. And that gives us the opportunity to do more of get into the world of case management, where if we start to track those milestones over the course of a first semester and a second semester, and if we start to see that students within, say, the social and behavioral sciences CAP that has whatever it is, I don't know, 1500 students… And in doing that, that's how we can model some of those best practices that have been effective for racial equity in our special populations.

Case 2 participants' view of providing more students with a case management framework allowed the college to serve more students via their CAPs. This does more than connect students to services; it also provides a sense of belonging. Olivia, the Dean of Institutional Effectiveness, described this work as an opportunity for, "having conversations about building relationships, building a sense of belonging, building community, just realizing if you are a good human and you create a good human experience, you're likely to have more success." This sentiment was expressed by all Case 2 participants.

Research focused on increasing student success and racial equity emphasizes that a student's sense of belonging is vital to supporting their educational goals and provides more opportunities to connect students with a college's culture and community (Cooper & Brohawn, 2023). Case 2 participants discussed how developing CAPs and Completion Teams has led to efforts to build more community and create a sense of belonging for students within their educational pathways. For example, Diane illustrated that, "When [students] do run into challenges and have obstacles come up, they'll have that support network that they feel safe enough to ask for help with." Furthermore, Case 2's Completion Team members also asked, "how do we do a better job [of] being very intentional about what that looks like in creating a sense of belonging?" Their intentional planning considered how to best communicate with students through community-building events. For example, Mary responded:

> Part of the work of those Completion Teams for each CAP has been to hold events. We
> have an open house with CAPs so that there's some sort of larger speaker, but then the
> opportunity to go and talk to either counselors or discipline faculty involved in a CAP
> and hear more about the CAP too. So, sharing who we are and what kind of majors and

what sort of questions and interests students might have that would help them identify a

particular CAP.

Based on the major college planning documents reviewed in this study, these activities are meant

to help students develop a relationship to the college by making connections between their

personal and educational goals and their CAPs.

While both colleges focused on implementing Student Success and Completion Teams to

implement the pillar two of Guided Pathways, their levels of success varied. Case 1 identified

Student Success Teams as an opportunity to support equity in their Educational Master Plan. Yet,

they faced challenges with creating the teams in sustainable ways and were not able to

successfully launch the teams. Case 2 was able to launch a more successful functional version

that they called Completion Teams. Their Completion Teams allowed for more collaboration

among individuals, which fostered more engagement with students. This led to CAP events

connecting students to resources and inviting STEM professionals of color to speak to students

about career opportunities that could increase students of color's sense of belonging—a key to

increasing student success and advancing racial equity. Aside from working to establish these

teams, both cases also focused on expanding resources, programs, and services often seen in

affinity programs for students while implementing Guided Pathways.

Learning from Affinity Programs

Participants in both cases shared that expanding resources, programs, and support

services for students plays a pivotal role in bolstering the effectiveness of the Guided Pathways

framework to advance racial equity. To support this vision, both cases discussed creating and

scaling affinity programs. In this section, I explain how participants discuss how both cases

attempted to scale up and increase some of the best practices employed in affinity programs, such as the establishment of Umoja Black Scholars to support racial equity.

The implementation of Guided Pathways at Case 2, exemplified by the expansion of affinity programs such as the Umoja Black Scholars, Dream Resource Center, Education, Opportunity, Program Services, Veterans Resource Center, and the Rainbow Pride Center, not only underscored their commitment to student success but also served as a model for incorporating identity-based support systems and best practices across the campus community. For example, the college president at Case 2 explained, "the Umoja Black Scholars, Dream Resource Center, EOPS, Veterans Resource Center, and now we have a Rainbow Pride Center. All of them are doing amazing work that is exactly what we'd hope for from a Guided Pathways framework." Brandon, one of the Case 2 faculty coordinators elaborated and shared:

> We know that those programs have better success and retention rates for their students. And so, as we've looked at those, it becomes a matter of trying to model out what they're doing in those programs. And so, when we stand back and we look at a program like that, we see a number of contributing factors. One of them is that there's an identity piece that the students tend to feel with those programs that as they talk about them, they don't necessarily say, I'm a college student, but I'm an EOPS student, or I'm an Umoja student.

Case 2 was not only expanding the affinity programs that they offer but also modeling best practices from these boutique programs. Mary, the current Guided Pathways faculty coordinator at Case 2 shared that the college has experienced a "cultural shift on campus," by expanding what has always been a part of, "boutique programs," and a little fragmented to the larger

campus community. These practices supported Guided Pathways implementation and were focused on addressing racial equity gaps that the college continues to face.

Case 1 was also creating new affinity programs while implementing Guided Pathways, especially focused on Black students. Based on the document analysis, the case acknowledged that research suggests that Black students who participate in affinity programs, such as Umoja have several advantages, like, higher unit attainment, persistence, completion of math and English courses, transfer readiness, and degree completion. They also have a higher chance of transferring to a four-year university (Cooper & Brohawn, 2023). While Case 1 did not have an Umoja program at the time of the study, the college established Black Scholars United (BSU). The BSU is a physical and online space focused on Black student success. Building off the Guided Pathways framework, the BSU aims to provide a pathway for Black students with academic preparation, student support services and life skills coaching to earn a degree, certificate, and/or transfer. The BSU is also focused on creating a welcoming community and safe place to provide opportunities for students to connect with each other and mentors while also celebrating Black culture.

While participants in both cases indicated an interest to expand affinity programs and best practices to support students and increase racial equity, they expressed various levels of community programming and engagement. Case 1 participants expressed challenges with those "leading these efforts," and their ability to, "get out in the forefront and speaking to the college community as a whole," about the programs that are being created. Essentially, Case 1 faced challenges with getting the word out to students and other faculty, staff, and administrators as they worked to expand affinity programs. Furthermore, while they acknowledged programs focused explicitly on Black students, Case 1 participants who self-identified as Latinx in their

interviews expressed concerns about expanding programs for Latinx students (incidentally, the largest student population at their college). For example, Evelyn shared:

> I see a lot of emphasis right now on our Black students, and I think it's great, and I know it's needed, but I also see disparities for our Latino students. And so, I would love to see us do similar processes for them, similar opportunities for them. And I think that we need to maybe have policies that guide this, and starting with College Council and Academic Senate, and making sure that these things go through the process so that we get faculty buy-in and community buy-in. But we need it, we need the policies and procedures, and we need Guided Pathways to promote that.

Evelyn's reflection emphasizes the need for equitable support and opportunities for Latinx students, similar to the attention given to Black students, advocating for the implementation of policies and procedures, including Guided Pathways, to address disparities and ensure inclusivity, with a call for faculty and community involvement in the process.

Case 2 participants discussed having more success with community outreach programs to support students of color. For example, David, the Case 2 college president, discussed a Black Excellence and Empowerment Summit that brought families together, including parents and Black prospective students, to share information about going to college. After this event, the college facilitated workshops on how to pay for college and how to navigate college services. Case 2 participants were also able to make more connections between their SEA plan and using the equity data in their plan to develop and increase affinity programs. Overall, Student Success and Completion Teams and expanding programs, resources, and student services by modeling best practices in affinity programs were the main activities that colleges pursued to implement

the pillar two of the Guided Pathways framework. RQ 2 is focused on how colleges are implementing Guided Pathways to advance racial equity.

Guided Pathways Implementation and Advancing Racial Equity

My RQ 2 is concerned with the ways in which two California Community Colleges are implementing Guided Pathways within the first two pillars to advance racial equity. The first sub-question of RQ 2 is concerned with what connections colleges are making between implementing Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity. Both case participants discussed that by improving the experiences for all students, colleges can also increase racial equity. While increasing student success is a key tenet of Guided Pathways, the focus on all students may dilute how the framework supports racial equity and cause it to be implemented from a race-neutral perspective.

The CCCCO describes Guided Pathways as an equity-focused framework engaged in removing systemic obstacles and creating clear educational pathways to support student success (CCCCO, n.d.e). Furthermore, the CCCCO states systemwide efforts like Guided Pathways are based on a central commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and anti-racism. Bonds (2022) explains that applying a racial equity lens to Guided Pathways requires us to center students of color in our redesign efforts. Therefore, this study is focused on what connections colleges are making to center the experiences of students of color while implementing Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity. In this next section, I describe how participants from each case described their perceptions of Guided Pathways and racial equity.

Diverse Perspectives on Guided Pathways and Racial Equity

Participants in the study exhibited a spectrum of perspectives regarding the connections between implementing Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity within their colleges. Some

participants expressed a strong belief in the potential of Guided Pathways to serve as a vehicle for promoting racial equity, highlighting initiatives such as targeted student support services, culturally responsive curriculum development, and efforts to address systemic barriers faced by underrepresented students. These individuals viewed Guided Pathways as an opportunity to intentionally address racial disparities in student outcomes and improve access, retention, and success for historically marginalized groups. Conversely, other participants were more skeptical, noting a lack of explicit attention to racial equity within Guided Pathways implementation efforts. They observed a disconnect between the rhetoric of equity and the practical realities of Guided Pathways initiatives, citing instances where racial equity considerations were sidelined or overlooked. Overall, participants' varied experiences underscores the complex and nuanced nature of the connections between Guided Pathways implementation and advancing racial equity, reflecting differing institutional contexts, priorities, and approaches to equity work.

Connections between Guided Pathways implementation and achieving racially equitable student outcomes varied among Case 1 participants. Some Case 1 participants could not make clear connections despite being named a top priority for the state and within their college's EMP, SOAA, and Guided Pathways Workplan. For example, when asked about how Guided Pathways can support racial equity, Linda, a Case 1 faculty member and Guided Pathways coordinator, shared:

> I struggle with that. I struggle trying to figure out, again, how does Guided Pathways help that? Because again, Guided Pathways to a student is Program Mapper. Get them in, get them out… I don't really know. So, this was an interesting interview because I never really thought about it again. Maybe it's the student services aspect of Guided Pathways, I think, that helps us get there. There's no racial equity in looking at Program Mapper and

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going, "Okay, I want to pick the STEM pathway and I want to get a chemistry degree. Okay, these are the classes I take."

The participant's comments highlight that they did not see how Guided Pathways was connected to racial equity and how race could impact a student's experience. When probing Christina, another Case 1 participant who served as a previous Guided Pathways administrative coordinator, about what recourses might be helpful to make connections between creating meta-majors and advancing racial equity, she further explicated, "So I don't know. I think more models of that type of example, like make the maps for the types of groups that you have…." While one participant struggled to connect racial equity and CAPs, the other acknowledged the connection but was unsure about what that would look like during implementation. Although identified as a top priority at the state and college level, Case 1 participants displayed varied levels of understanding and clarity regarding the relationship between Guided Pathways implementation and achieving racially equitable student outcomes. Despite the uncertainty expressed by some, several other Case 1 participants clearly understood the vision of Guided Pathways supporting racial equity but haven't yet seen this vision come to fruition at their college.

Some Case 1 participants expressed uncertainty and concern regarding integrating racial equity into Guided Pathways discussions, emphasizing a disconnect between the two concepts within collegiate discourse. For example, Evelyn shared, "I have yet to be in a conversation where it begins with, 'African American students are completing this class at much lower rates successfully than this other group. What are we going to do about this?'" Evelyn's comments reverberate other participants' concerns about how the college struggled to start implementing Guided Pathways in conversation with racial equity. Another Case 1 participant, Felipe,

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reiterated, "Right now, honestly, I haven't seen it. I mean, as we're talking right now, I can definitely see a connection because obviously we want to simplify the path for our students." When probing Felipe about the connection, they recall:

> I don't think we've made that connection, Guided Pathways and equity, because folks have not wanted to talk about equity. It's just, "Oh, well, it's Guided Pathways. We have to implement it." So, there hasn't been a strong connection made between the two.

Christina shared a similar sentiment:

> I read that in your letter to recruit me, and I thought, oh, I should have something to say about this, but I still don't, which is telling and a little embarrassing, but I feel like I don't know if there was enough overlap.

Participants seemed to express a desire to make the connection between Guided Pathways and racial equity, but the connection was not always articulated clearly.

While some Case 1 participants expressed some uncertainty and concern about the connection between racial equity and Guided Pathways, other Case 1 participants emphasized parallels between their own identities and experiences and the role the framework can play in supporting students of color. For example, Elyse, one self-identified participant of color, shared:

> Knowing the struggles that I had as a student, I always try to look at those areas that I could have benefited more from. And knowing the struggles of our students who come to this college, it really drives me to make those connections for the students when considering new programs.

Participants who had personal experiences throughout their own educational journey that were impacted by their identities or lived experiences seemed to better articulate the connection between Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity. Elyse clarified:

So, I think using Guided Pathways for, it can really be that tool that really kind of gives

them everything they need, but we need to figure that out. And I think it does, being that

we're a Latino serving institution and have the highest number of Black students in our

college, we have an opportunity to see change, to make change for them. So, yeah,

Guided Pathways is quite the tool and I think it's good for underrepresented students.

Overall, there were varied articulations of the connection between Guided Pathways and

advancing racial equity within Case 1. Despite some participants communicating some

understanding of the vision of Guided Pathways supporting racial equity, several Case 1

participants have yet to witness this vision materialize at their college, revealing a gap between

conceptual understanding and practical implementation.

Case 2 participants reported that they have been reflecting on how they are working to

support student success while focusing on specific racial equity opportunities. All Case 2

participants acknowledged the college's existing approach toward supporting all students, while

recognizing the need to disaggregate data to identify any disparities in completion rates among

different demographic groups. For example, Andy, a senior administrator at Case 2 shared:

I think [our] approach up to now has been "Okay, what are we going to do for all of these

students?" And I don't think that's a bad approach. We could keep that and say, "Let's

have some activities for all students. Then let's also disaggregate the data. Is there

disproportionate completion by demographic categories?" And, if so, should we target

some of our efforts to those groups?

Andy also acknowledged the disconnect between focusing on racial equity and, "rising the tide

activities to benefit all students." This sentiment was acknowledged by several Case 2

participants. Olivia comments, "I've been trying to really steer conversations away from equity-

for-all, which are race-neutral or group-agnostic approaches." However, most participants in Case 2 used the general term, "equity," versus "racial equity," when specifically tasked with elucidating their understanding and definition of racial equity during participant interviews. In the next sub-section of this study's findings, I articulate how participants defined equity and how their definitions varied regarding their considerations of race and ethnic identity.

Making Sense of Racial Equity in the Context of Guided Pathways Implementation

The second sub-question of my RQ 2 examines how faculty and administrators are making sense of Guided Pathways implementation and advancing racial equity in relation to their understanding of equity. Since this study was focused on examining the relationship between implementing Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity, several interview questions were focused on making sense of this connection. All participants were asked how their college has defined racial equity. Participants were also asked how they define racial equity and if their definitions differed from their college's. In the following section, I discuss how participants in both cases defined racial equity in the context of major planning documents and how they are making sense of racial equity as they implement Guided Pathways.

In both cases, participants engaged in a multifaceted discussion of racial equity, delineating their understanding across various constructs. They grappled with racial equity at macro and micro levels, perceiving it as both systemic and interpersonal. At the macro level, participants conceptualized racial equity as a societal issue, focusing on systemic structures and policies. Meanwhile, at the micro level, they emphasized individual interactions and biases, acknowledging the importance of addressing racism on an interpersonal level. Moreover, participants viewed racial equity as a dynamic process, recognizing the ongoing efforts required for its realization. They also contemplated racial equity as an outcome, emphasizing the tangible

results of achieving equitable outcomes. In addition, participants described racial equity as anti-racism, characterizing it as actively pushing back against and dismantling racist ideologies, policies, and behaviors. Within these various lenses, participants navigate the complexities of racial equity, underscoring its multifaceted nature and the imperative for comprehensive approaches to achieve meaningful change. In this next section, I organize the major themes and findings around these racial equity constructs and organize the constructs by each case.

Racial Equity as a Process

Racial equity as a process embodies a dynamic journey toward dismantling systemic barriers over the course of time and acknowledges the diverse needs for supporting this project including professional development, capacity, and clarity on what activities to pursue. Participants in this study recognized that achieving racial equity requires ongoing and deliberate efforts, marked by continuous reflection, learning, and action. As Avery described, "racial equity is something that many of us at the college are working towards in many of the different areas." Case 1 participants acknowledged that racial equity work impacts all areas of the college. Avery also recognized what has supported her understanding of racial equity and Guided Pathways. She shared, "we understood that pathways and equity, they should be embedded together, that pathways were meant to achieve equity, frankly." Evelyn expanded on this sentiment, noting:

> If we are truly [a] race-conscious campus, one of the ways that that's going to demonstrate itself is by making sure that we're providing the right professional development to our faculty and to our staff that makes them all sensitized to some of the potential needs or some of the potential challenges that students have experienced before getting here. So, it's making folks aware and us really grappling with if we feel that there are broader social inequities, that those students aren't coming in like a blank slate.

They're already feeling the weight of that, and we need to be responsive in how we serve

students rather than assuming that everything is good until they bring up an issue, and

then we need to do something to be more, I guess, responsive.

Evelyn's comments emphasized the importance of providing appropriate professional

development to faculty and staff to create a racially conscious campus environment. She

underscored the notion that racial equity is a process that requires ongoing efforts to sensitize

individuals to the needs and challenges faced by students, particularly those stemming from

broader social inequities. By acknowledging that students arrive on campus already impacted by

societal inequalities, this quote highlights the necessity of proactive and responsive approaches

to serving students. This connection maintains that racial equity is not a fixed state, but a

continuous journey involving constant awareness, learning, and adaptation to effectively address

systemic barriers and support marginalized communities.

While Case 1 participants recognized that racial equity is a process, some participants

expressed frustration with the inefficiency of the process at their college. For example, Christina

as noted:

I think some of the projects that were launched were throwing spaghetti at the wall and

see what sticks versus if this group is not performing, is there a way to engage the group

or engage in a way to look at the data to figure out what's going on with that group?

While the metaphor of, "throwing spaghetti at the wall and see what sticks," implies a haphazard

or disjointed approach to addressing issues, it also shines a light on the idea of racial equity as a

process that involves continuous assessment, reflection, and refinement of strategies to

effectively address disparities and ensure equitable outcomes. Furthermore, Evelyn emphasized

the importance of adopting a strategic and analytical approach rather than relying on trial and

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error. She shared that when encountering challenges within a group, it is essential to engage with them directly and analyze data to understand the root causes of the issues. Overall, most Case 1 participants communicated an understanding that this process entails confronting historical injustices, challenging entrenched power dynamics, and actively working toward inclusive policies and practices. Importantly, participants acknowledged that the journey towards racial equity involves iterative steps, with progress often accompanied by setbacks and the need for resilience.

Embracing racial equity as a process necessitates a commitment to sustained engagement, collaboration, and adaptation, recognizing that meaningful change unfolds over time through intentional and collective efforts. Case 2 participants emphasized dialogue and campus-wide conversations as they articulate racial equity as a process. For example, David, the college president, shared that it is important to, "[make] sure that there is space to have these important conversations and that the conversations are leading to some productive actions, and again, similarly, the conversations really extend to every facet of the college." David underscored the vital role of ongoing dialogue and action across all facets of the college, illustrating how racial equity is a continuous process that requires not only creating spaces for critical conversations, but also ensuring that these discussions translate into meaningful and productive actions aimed at fostering equity and inclusion. Andy, Vice President of Academic Affairs at Case 2, echoed some of the sentiments Evelyn shared at Case 1 regarding professional development. He discussed having conversations with various groups, such as directors and chairs, about how they are working toward more racially equitable outcomes, "using it almost as a professional development session to focus people on racial equity." Overall, participants reported making sense of racial equity via Guided Pathways as a process that involves dialogue, professional

development, and identifying specific strategies to employ collectively to support more racially equitable outcomes for students.

Racial Equity as an Outcome

The CCCCO articulates the Guided Pathways framework as a vehicle to achieve racial equity as an outcome by creating systematic supports and interventions designed to mitigate disparities in student success. Both case participants defined racial equity with a significant emphasis on outcomes aimed at achieving measurable progress in closing equity gaps based on the data reported to the CCCCO in the SOAA, SEA plans, and Guided Pathways Workplans. The SEA plan and Guided Pathways Workplan are designed to be guiding documents for all efforts related to Guided Pathways and equity. In this next section, I describe how each case articulated racial equity as an outcome and the implications of this sense-making.

The Guided Pathways Workplan was specifically designed to better connect the equity efforts listed in the SEA plan, including activities and metrics, to Guided Pathways implementation. For example, Linda, the Guided Pathways Coordinator at Case 1, shared, "The new Guided Pathways Workplan that we were required to write, honestly, was a reworking of our Student Equity plan… It was a very, very nice intersection between those two documents." While these plans can provide more clarity around the racial equity work that colleges are implementing and the goals colleges are striving to achieve based on their data, these plans can also limit understanding of racial equity based on the definitions and parameters within each plan. For example, as Christina shared:

> I think the college defined racial equity based on whatever the Chancellor's Office said we had to do for racial equity work. Meaning if you have to fill out this report, fill out the report; if you have to disaggregate data in this way, disaggregate your data. I don't know

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if there actually is a more intentional, purposeful way that the college engages in the

work versus mandatory and what's required for the funding.

Christina pointed out that the college's approach to racial equity may be primarily driven by

compliance with external mandates rather than a genuine commitment to intentional and

purposeful engagement with the work. It suggests that efforts towards racial equity may be more

focused on meeting requirements set by the Chancellor's Office, such as filling out reports or

disaggregating data, rather than actively pursuing meaningful and transformative practices.

Avery shared that aside from being the Guided Pathways Coordinator at Case 1, she was also the

Educational Master Plan Faculty Co-Chair, and while revising the EMP:

we purposed to embed racial equity and inclusivity in general into the educational master

plan explicitly. And in fact, we designed a crosswalk that essentially mapped the goals of

the educational master plan to campus efforts, and not just campus efforts, but things that

the college could do, for example, things faculty could do, for example, seeking out

culturally relevant training. We created a crosswalk that sort of mapped specific actions

that the college and the faculty and different constituent groups could do to work towards

racial equity.

The college integrated racial equity goals, activities, and outcomes directly into the educational

master plan. Yet, participants expressed challenges with achieving these outcomes and engaging

in the plan after its creation. Linda, the Guided Pathways Coordinator at Case 1 after Avery,

explained, "I'm familiar with these documents. I dare say, the majority of faculty aren't." When

following up with Linda about her response, she clarified:

Unless you're in a leadership position or unless you are like you and me, and you join

committees and you do that kind of stuff and you get involved in the writing of it, you

have no idea… There's a small contingent of faculty that are involved in this, and it's the same group over and over and over again… Go ahead. Stop a full-time faculty member on campus and say, "When's the Education Management Plan need to be rewritten?" And they'd be like, "don't know. It's 2026, right?" And that's a guess. I'm even guilty of it. We're very busy and we silo ourselves. We're responsible for our courses. So, my question to you is, I'm going to turn around and ask you a question. How am I supposed to be responsible for disaggregating data and fixing all of the disproportionate impacts I have in my class? And then I have to turn around and worry about how the Education Master Plan is. It's just too much sometimes. And I think full-time faculty have a lot on their plate and they go, "Look, I've got bandwidth for this. I don't have bandwidth for this, this, and this." So, if we can integrate them all together and show them how, for example, the Guided Pathways Workplan can help them lessen their disproportionate impacts, that might be a way of going about it.

Linda's comments highlight the challenges faced by faculty in engaging with the comprehensive plans. While these plans articulate specific activities and goals that are focused on achieving racial equity, there are limited awareness and involvement of faculty due to competing responsibilities and time constraints. Disaggregated equity data can help identify specific student populations that need additional attention and support. However, the plans can fall short of supporting racially equitable outcomes based on understanding the data, participating in interventions, and the ability to integrate specific policies and practices that are focused on addressing the equity opportunities among a group of individuals who feel they do not have the capacity to engage in this work.

Chase et al. (2020) found in their analysis of SEA plans across the CCC system that many activities colleges identify to address their disproportionally impacted outcomes did not include specific racial groups, although the metrics in the SEA plans focus on racially inequitable outcomes. These plans often drive the activities that colleges are pursuing to address racial equity, but how they are written, and the language used, can have an impact on implementors' understanding of racial equity. When asked to define racial equity during interviews, most Case 2 participants defined racial equity using generic equity language found in major planning documents rather than specifically focusing on race/ethnicity or racial/ethnic identity. For example, most Case 2 participants' definitions of racial equity used the term "disproportionally impacted groups." These definitions were heavily impacted by each college's major planning documents. Many Case 2 participants defined racial equity to articulate their understanding of a required planning tool, such as the SEA plan and Guided Pathways Workplan, rather than a lived racialized experience within a larger racialized context. Brandon, the current Guided Pathways faculty coordinator at Case 2, affirmed:

> We've had general conversations and specific conversations that have been driven by the different state plans for that. What are we going to consider equity populations? And so, that's changed with the state definitions as we've worked on the equity plan.

By over relying on state-wide plans to define and understand racial equity, limited definitions are developed, resulting in a reproduction of generic understandings of equity that utilizes deficit language and race-neutral language. In turn, these incomplete definitions may impact how implementors are able to make connections between these state-wide initiatives, and the activities and goals focused explicitly on improving racial equity at each college.

Articulating racial equity as an outcome can offer several advantages. First, it can provide clear and measurable goals, offering a tangible marker for progress and accountability. By defining racial equity as an outcome, institutions can track inequitable findings, evaluate interventions, and ensure that efforts result in concrete improvements. However, there are also drawbacks to solely focusing on racial equity as an outcome. This construct may overlook the complexities and root causes of racial disparities, reducing the approach to a numbers game rather than addressing underlying systemic issues such as capacity, knowledge, and skills needed to address racial equity. Moreover, a narrow focus on outcomes might lead to surface-level interventions that fail to address the deep-seated structural inequities that perpetuate racial disparities. Thus, while articulating racial equity as an outcome is valuable, these findings suggest that it must be complemented by comprehensive strategies that address systemic barriers and foster a culture of inclusivity. In the next section, I address additional findings that may create barriers to working toward racial equity.

Racial Equity as Lip Service

As racial equity is tied to more funding and resources from the state, some scholars and practitioners have become concerned about the watering down of equity initiatives and using terms like equity and racial equity as buzzwords used to secure state and grant funding. Campus leaders at both sites also expressed concerns about using racial equity as lip service because it is assumed to be a priority for the college and the state. Yet, a noticeable difference between these cases was that Case 1 participants seemed to emphasize the lip service. In addition, they expressed concern about implementing superficial measures aimed at appearing inclusive and addressing racial disparities, preventing those with a genuine commitment to systemic change from supporting Guided Pathways implementation in ways that would lead to more

transformation. However, while Case 2 participants expressed concerns about using racial equity as lip service, they had more success approaching racial equity through an anti-racist lens. In this next section, I explain how each cases' participants made sense of racial equity while implementing the first two pillars of Guided Pathways. Then, I compare the similarities and differences of each cases' findings.

Despite Guided Pathways being used as the framework for Case 1's educational master plan, participants reported uncertainty about how senior leaders prioritized Guided Pathways and racial equity. This uncertainty stemmed from a perceived lack of ownership and commitment to the actual work of Guided Pathways. For example, one Case 1 faculty member shared:

> The college president will often say, "Okay, let me let you guys do your work. I'm going to leave." And I think both of those absences are a kind of message. They're a message by omission anyway, that this isn't a priority for him. I think it's a priority for our college president from an ego place only. I don't think equity is something he cares about because I don't think he truly understands it.

Avery's quote highlights her perception of how the college president's frequent absence during discussions on equity sends a message of indifference and lack of prioritization towards the issue, suggesting that his engagement is driven more by ego than genuine concern or understanding of equity. Yet, other participants share this lack of understanding and view lip service as an institutional issue. Evelyn shared:

> I think the challenges that we have, I think, are self-inflicted. I think it's that we don't believe that we have the resources in place to get us to a place where we're doing more equity work. I just think that it's usually an afterthought. It's something that is spoken of a lot at the beginning. But in terms of how it manifests itself in our discussions and our

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planning, we still very much are a general-serving population, at least in terms of how we

approach things.

Her comments suggest that the challenges faced in advancing racial equity are often self-inflicted

due to a lack of belief in the availability or adequacy of resources dedicated to this work. It

highlights how discussions of equity may be initially emphasized but tend to become

marginalized in practice, serving as more of an afterthought than a genuine priority. This reflects

the phenomenon of racial equity being treated as lip service, where there is initial lip service paid

to the importance of equity, but insufficient resources, attention, and planning are allocated

toward achieving meaningful progress in addressing racial disparities.

Despite Case 1 participants acknowledging the importance of equity in every element of

Guided Pathways, there was skepticism regarding whether these statements were more than mere

lip service. For example, one Case 1 participant, who I will not share their pseudonym due to the

sensitive and vulnerable statement, shared:

We're primarily mostly 50% or so Latino, but we don't have any programming that's

Latino-specific or Latina-specific. So, when I brought up the fact that we don't have

programming that's Latina-specific, the comment I get, and I won't say who, is, "Oh,

what are we going to do? What are we going to get, a program for every program? So,

next we're going to have a program for Asians? We're going to have a program for

whatever group?" So, that's not the response. The response is, "You know what? You're

right. How can we better support our Latinas and Latino students? What are we seeing in

terms of disparities? How can we scale that up?" But there's this hesitation to create

programming specific for groups that are marginalized groups that have achievement

gaps for whatever reason. So, it was a real push and fight to go ahead and get our BSU

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funded, so this is our Black Scholars United program, and even the funding that we got,

it's very minimal. You're like, "Well, we have funding for that. Why don't we use the

funding that we have for that?" But even with that, it was a fight. So, we're going to

continue to advocate for that, but there seems to be a hesitation, and a challenge and all

these obstacles put in front of us. Even though we say we're about equity, we are not

showing it by the resources that we're providing to our students of color.

The statement highlights the participant's frustration with the lack of support for programs

specific to marginalized groups, particularly Latinx students. Despite being a significant portion

of the population, there was resistance to creating programming tailored to their needs based on

the data the college collected. This further underscores a disconnect between stated commitments

to racial equity and allocating resources to support students of color.

Participants at Case 2 also recognized how the term equity is often used in discussions

about Guided Pathways. For example, David, the college president, shared, "In every element of

Guided Pathways, I think equity, oftentimes, not every... hyperbole a little bit. It's typically the

case with the major elements of Guided Pathways that equity comes up as an important

consideration." David shared that while equity is an essential consideration in Guided Pathways,

it may not be the sole focus in every aspect. He acknowledged that equity is frequently

emphasized in significant elements of Guided Pathways. However, some Case 2 participants

discussed the challenge of ensuring that equity is not treated as an afterthought but is integrated

from the foundation of new policies and structures. For example, Olivia discussed:

So, I think a challenge is to make sure that equity isn't tacked on as an afterthought to

plans in a particular arena that it's from the foundation of building out a new policy or

building out a new structure for students to work through whatever it is that committee's

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working on, and whatever grant is funding that particular project that that links into and communicates with and coordinates with all of the other sort of grant funded or special projects that we have going. And I think we risk losing the level of integration that Guided Pathways brought to the efforts on campus. And so, making sure that we don't lose that sort of integration as we go forward.

Overall, Case 2 participants acknowledged that to avoid equity as lip service, the college cannot have a top-down approach, and racial equity needs to be at the center of the work. David, the Case 2 college president, expressed:

Anti-racism sometimes can be a little controversial, but by and large, I think we're all committed to these goals, and nobody has to be sold on it. I try not to take a top-down approach to implementing anything. I do press sometimes some conversations, but I try to create spaces for people to have conversation. And when I have a decision to be made, I try to have an environment where people are free to share what they truly believe is going to be important to consider for that, and have robust conversations, break down silos, make sure that people are working together. Really intentionally dismantling any barriers between areas so that folks are truly engaged in conversation.

Unlike Case 1, and the concerns participants had with senior administrators using racial equity as lip service, Case 2's college president articulates a vision of racial equity that expressed a commitment to anti-racism while acknowledging potential controversies. He suggested that while he avoids a top-down approach to implementation, he strives to foster spaces for open conversation.

In the study, two distinct cases identified contrasting approaches to racial equity within the context of implementing Guided Pathways. Case 1 expressed concern that racial equity was

often treated as mere lip service by senior leadership. Despite acknowledging its importance, senior leaders would seemingly distance themselves from actively supporting the work, leaving implementation to others. This approach implied a lack of genuine commitment and meaningful involvement in fostering racial equity. Conversely, Case 2 demonstrated a strong commitment to an anti-racism framework, emphasizing the need for proactive measures to foster discourse, develop policies, and take actions aimed at dismantling racial inequities. Unlike Case 1, Case 2 advocated for a deeper engagement that transcended lip service, aiming to promote real change and inclusivity within the organization. While each case reported similar and differing experiences with making connections between Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity both cases faced challenges. In the next section, I detail these challenges as described by participants.

Challenges Advancing Racial Equity while Implementing Guided Pathways

RQ 3 is concerned with what challenges faculty and administrators face, if any, with advancing racial equity while implementing Guided Pathways. Participants discussed several challenges, including access to funding and resources, leadership dynamics, and working across silos. To do so, I discuss the challenges identified during participant interviews.

Funding and Resources

While the state and CCCCO have provided funds specific to Guided Pathways, participants from both cases expressed concern with the amount of funding and how the future of Guided Pathways will evolve as funding decreases. For example, Linda, a faculty coordinator at Case 1 expressed that because Guided Pathways and racial equity work involves transforming institutions and working to eradicate historical inequities that are embedded within our educational systems and throughout larger society, the initial funding was helpful to paying for a

core group of individuals to lead the work and inquire about how to implement change.

However, most participants at both cases felt long lasting change will require a larger financial

investment from the system. Another faculty coordinator at Case 2, Mary, expressed that as the

funding from the state decreases there is uncertainty about how these efforts will be sustainable.

For example, a Felipe, a senior administrator at Case 1 illustrated:

> We have support now, but is it going to stay consistent? How can we get the consistent
>
> resources to continue to do the equity work? Because the moment we don't have any of
>
> those, whether it's the support from up above or the resources, stuff stops. And folks get
>
> frustrated, and they don't want to continue because why continue to have a conversation
>
> if you know where it's going to end, with nothing? That's the frustrating part, is that,
>
> again, there is a disconnect, a contradiction that shouldn't be there but is. So how do you
>
> navigate that? That's a challenge, a big challenge.

Felipe expressed concerns about the sustainability of support for equity work and frustration at

the prospect of engaging in conversations without tangible outcomes due to a perceived

contradiction between the importance of equity and the lack of ongoing support. This challenge

of navigating inconsistent support poses a significant obstacle to advancing equity initiatives. For

example, Linda, the current faculty coordinator at Case 1 commented:

> I don't even know if they're going to renew this position. We don't even know if there's
>
> going to be money, but it's been a very valuable position. I've learned a lot about Guided
>
> Pathways and how faculty view it and how students view it. So, I think I'm just sort of
>
> that intermediary, trying to kind of bring everybody together.

Overall, all participants from both cases expressed concern about how to sustain efforts that

required additional labor and expertise outside of their main roles on campus without ongoing

financial support from the state. Aside from funding, participants at Case 1 expressed challenges

working leadership dynamics and working across silos.

Leadership Dynamics and Silos

Implementing Guided Pathways with a focus on advancing racial equity can be

challenging due to existing campus traditions, conditions, and leadership dynamics. One

recurring issue at Case 1 was the resistance faced when introducing changes due to the ways in

which the college is organized. Participants, particularly at Case 1, expressed concerns about

making real progress due to a variety of institutional challenges, including silos across Academic

Affairs, Student Services, and the Office of the President. For example, one Case 1 participant

expressed the lack of effective leadership at the presidential level as a concern. The participant

explained that the absence of commitment and involvement from the college president around

clear equity goals sends a message that equity initiatives, including Guided Pathways, are not a

priority for them. One participant, who's pseudonym I did not share because of the sensitive

nature of the comment, expressed:

> I think he cares about people, and he cares about students, but he comes from that older
>
> demographic of people who haven't read the books and been participating in the most
>
> recent conversations about equity in the public sphere. So, it does bother me that the
>
> academic senate president and the college president show no leadership around this.

This remark highlights a perception of a lack of engagement and understanding from college

leadership, particularly regarding issues of equity and inclusivity. The college president's

tendency to attend meetings briefly and then leave, along with their perceived disconnection

from current conversations on these topics, suggests a gap in leadership. The participant

expressed concern that despite caring about people and students, the president's approach reflected a lack of involvement in discussions about racial equity at the college.

The existence of silos was also a recurring theme among Case 1 participants, hindering the collaboration required for effective implementation. During Case 1 participant interviews, silos were identified between Student Services and Academic Affairs, as well as within the implementation of Guided Pathways itself. The segmented nature of planning and lack of involvement from the entire campus community posed significant challenges to the coherent execution of Guided Pathways. For example, Evelyn, a Case 1 administrator, shared:

> I think there's a lot of siloing at our campus when it comes to Student Services and Academic Affairs where the Guided Pathways is in Academic Affairs and first year student experience and the recruitment is in Student Services, and they're just not coming together as we should to really get the students on that path and the clarifying the path. It's more of, these are our students in here and we're guiding them to do what we need them to do. Academic Affairs is on the back burner, and it doesn't work that way, Guided Pathways will never come together in the institution if we don't start to work together to mend those pieces and bring them together.

Faculty members also expressed concerns about Academic Affairs and Student Services working together across silos to advance Guided Pathways. For example, Linda, the faculty coordinator at Case 1, stated:

> We're not part of the initial onboarding process, so we are constantly scrambling behind. We're never going to make it if we're running behind the train. We have to be on the train when it leaves the station and we're just never invited. It's like no one wants to sell us a ticket. So, unless we have the administrators that are on board, we're going to get shut

out. I mean, as a faculty member, I can only do so much. I can email, I can go to

meetings, but the administrators have got to be on board, just as much as our faculty are

on board.

Although both faculty and administrators recognized that efforts are needed to break down these

silos, there seemed to be challenges with working directly together with different areas of the

college, fostering transparency, and sharing information across departments. The emphasis on

collaboration and the commitment to breaking down silos were seen as essential steps toward

achieving the goals of Guided Pathways and promoting racial equity.

Summary

In summary, using document analysis and twelve semi-structured interviews of faculty

and administrators at two California Community Colleges in a large urban school district, I

found that while implementing pillar one of Guided Pathways, both cases focused on responding

to a call for change, creating Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs), and mapping programs.

While Case 1 focused on responding to a state-wide mandate when establishing their Guided

Pathways leadership team, Case 2 focused on building the momentum from previous institutional

successes, which had an impact on the longevity of their work and how the college was able to

make clear connections between Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity. Yet, both cases

focused on all students and made limited connections to racial equity when establishing CAPs

and mapping programs.

While implementing pillar two of Guided Pathways, both cases launched Student Success

and Completion Teams and expanded programs, resources, and services for students based on

successful strategies found within affinity programs. Still, Case 1 expressed challenges working

across silos, which impacted their ability to successfully launch and sustain their Student Success

Teams. However, Case 2 shared success with launching their Completion Teams, identifying outcomes and progress based on their launch, and shared success expanding programs, resources, and services by scaling best practices from existing affinity programs focused on supporting racial equity.

Both cases continue to work towards making the connection between implementing Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity, especially in their planning documents, such as the Educational Master Plan and Guided Pathways Workplan. Yet, both case participants discussed racial equity as equal opportunities for all, perpetuating race-neutral and race-evasive rhetoric about Guided Pathways and racial equity work. In addition, while the Student Equity and Achievement Plan provided both cases an opportunity to identify disproportionally impacted student groups, the language used in the plan permeated into the local discourse of the interview participants, causing implementors to rely on race-neutral language to describe students experiencing racially inequitable outcomes. Furthermore, faculty and administrators make sense of Guided Pathways and racial equity in the context of the planning documents, which some participants describe as a watering down of racial equity and racial equity as lip service. Both cases also articulated challenges to this work, including funding and resources and Case 1 expressed challenges with leadership dynamics and institutional silos. In the next chapter, I will describe this study's recommendations, implications, and limitations.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

During all the qualitative interviews, I asked participants if there was anything else they would like to share with me before concluding. The second participant I interviewed, Evelyn, shared:

> I think it's fantastic that you're doing this work, Anthony, because it's needed. It's absolutely needed. I think that we're in a place right now where people think that Guided Pathways, creating CAPs is the end of it. Oh, we did that work and now... That's not it, there's so much more to this puzzle. And I think your dissertation will really shine some light on those things and hopefully make it better for everyone, for the students, for the institutions. And I think your dissertation's timely, and it's going to be great.

Evelyn's comments underscore the demand for this study and why additional research is needed to better understand how to move forward with this work. Early studies on colleges implementing Guided Pathways highlight that implementation falls along various degrees of adoption (Bailey-Hoffman, 2019). To understand how colleges continue to make progress on racial equity while implementing Guided Pathways, this multi-site case study examined major college planning documents, such as the Educational Master Plan, Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) plan, Scale of Adoption Assessment (SOAA) and Guided Pathways Workplan to contextualize local Guided Pathways implementation, including the equity-related activities that colleges prioritized to implement and the perceptions of these activities on achieving racially equitable outcomes. In addition, this study sought to identify any obstacles that might hinder the implementation of the Guided Pathways framework to support closing racial equity gaps.

This work contributes to the limited qualitative research on Guided Pathways and racial equity. It focuses on the first two pillars of Guided Pathways: 1) clarifying the path, and 2) entering the path. It spotlights the perceptions of faculty and administrators at two colleges by using qualitative interviews. In addition, the study begins to fill in the literature gap of making sense of Guided Pathways in the context of racial equity and the unique perceptions and experiences of individuals implementing the framework at their colleges. In this final chapter, I summarize and make meaning of the most notable findings in this study. Then, I discuss recommendations, and implications for policy and practitioners focused on advancing racial equity while putting Guided Pathways into practice. Next, I consider limitations, directions for future research, and how I will disseminate the findings. I end with a personal reflection about my reasons for conducting this study and my experience throughout the process.

Summary and Interpretation of the Findings

This study aims to understand the specific activities that each case uses to support Guided Pathways, pillar's 1 and 2 before contextually exploring how these activities might relate to racial equity. The purpose of asking this question stems from the preliminary research on Guided Pathways. Bailey-Hofmann (2019) found that early studies on colleges implementing pathways fell along various degrees of adoption. Therefore, this study initially focuses on evaluating the development and progress each case has made in implementing the first two pillars of Guided Pathways. The first two pillars are of particular importance because research suggests that colleges have prioritized pillar's 1 and 2 during implementation (Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2020b). Many institutions began applying Guided Pathways by focusing on either pillar one (clarifying paths) and/or pillar two (helping students choose a path). What

follows is a summary and interpretation of this study's findings organized by research question and major themes.

Implementing the First Pillar of Guided Pathways

Responding to a call for change. My first research question examined in what ways are two California Community Colleges implementing Guided Pathways. The first sub question centered pillar one of Guided Pathways. This study found that both cases began implementing pillar one by creating the Guided Pathways team. While Judkins et al. (2019) highlights that building a strong leadership team is one of the most crucial components of initiatives focused on organizational change, few Guided Pathways research studies have focused on this important aspect of implementation. A notable finding of this study indicated how each team's initial response to the Guided Pathways initiative, along with the approach of composing their leadership team and connecting with the broader campus community, influenced how the framework was perceived and ultimately operationalized. This also impacted the connections made between Guided Pathways and racial equity in the future and how each case progressed during implementation.

While both cases established a leadership team to begin the work and introduce the Guided Pathways framework to their larger campus communities, Case 1 focused on responding to a state-wide mandate, and Case 2 focused on building upon the momentum and buy-in from previous successful initiatives focused on increasing student success. This finding is significant because it highlights the diverse approaches institutions may take when implementing Guided Pathways. While Case 1's response to a state-wide mandate underscores the importance of external pressures in driving institutional change, Case 2's emphasis on leveraging prior successful initiatives demonstrates the value of building upon existing momentum and buy-in

within the institution. By recognizing and capitalizing on past successes, Case 2 engenders a more seamless transition to Guided Pathways implementation. This finding aligns with Hargreaves's (2022) analysis of practitioner perspectives on implementing Guided Pathways at California community colleges as well as other key studies on Guided Pathways in education (Adelman & Taylor, 2003; Denton et al., 2003). Adelman and Taylor (2003) articulate the importance of communicating the larger picture and context of policies for them to be successful in creating change. Fixsen et al. (2005) suggest that organizational leaders must communicate the need for change in a way that helps the larger community understand the urgency for innovation and to reduce nascent resistance and skepticism. This study found that the way each case responded to a call for change impacted how CAPs were developed, received, and mapped. Moreover, the progress made during pillar one implementation influenced later progress with pillar two implementation.

Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs) The findings of this study build upon earlier works that have examined Guided Pathways implementation, echoing that creating meta-majors or Career and Academic Pathways (CAPs) were early priorities (Jenkins et al., 2022; Waugh, 2016). Cesar-Davis (2020) argues that for meta-majors to support increased student success and equity, colleges must first understand how student groups explore majors and what makes sense to them. Both cases took an inclusive approach focused on getting input from students, faculty, staff, and administrators to intentionally create their CAPs. This early prioritization led to a full-scale implementation of CAPs at each campus. Both cases were also early adopters of Program Mapper technology and attempted to make connections between racial equity and CAPs. Case 1 faced resistance from faculty due to concerns about autonomy, workload, and curriculum changes, despite recognizing the potential for CAPs to advance racial equity goals. While Case 1

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initially appeared more equity-focused, Case 2 achieved greater integration of CAPs with equity initiatives. Case 2 also communicated more success with institutionalizing Program Mapper, building community and culture around CAPs, and working to connect CAPs to best align with one of their nearby four-year colleges. In addition, Case 2 participants expressed a sense of pride around implementing this work. The success of Case 2 may be due to the strong relationships that were built around Guided Pathways. Good relationships among key stakeholders creates a sense of community that can foster greater success (Damschroder et al., 2009; Fixsen et al., 2005; Hargreaves, 2022).

While both cases engaged in creating CAPs, they did not evaluate their impact on student success, equity, and completion. Sublett and Orenstein (2021) argue that colleges must continuously evaluate meta-majors to understand their impact on the student experience. Furthermore, both cases focused on traditional pathways and limited labor market data and did not consider more equitable perspectives on CAP creation including students' funds of knowledge (Rose et al., 2019). Galan et al. (2023) note that to better understand the impact that CAPs are having, especially on students of color, colleges should disaggregate programmatic outcomes and comparisons across labor-market data. Rather, they should work to increase and enhance experiential learning, like internship opportunities and mentoring programs that specifically concentrate on students of color. Overall, CAPs were a significant focus for both cases and there remains more opportunities to reflect on what currently exists to support students of color to close racial equity gaps.

Implementing the Second Pillar of Guided Pathways

Student Success and Completion Teams. To implement pillar two of Guided Pathways, both cases focused on Student Success and Completion Teams and expanding resources and

services often found within boutique affinity programs. Although launching Student Success Teams was an explicit equity priority for Case 1, participants expressed concerns and challenges with implementing the framework and an inability to scale the teams across the college. Ultimately, Student Success Teams were not launched despite identifying them as an important goal in the college's EMP. Various stakeholders, including administrators and faculty members, discussed the difficulties in staffing the teams sustainably and integrating them into the college's operations. Johnstone and Karandjeff (2017) argue that faculty, staff, and administrators are already working at full capacity. Since Student Success Teams require additional time and support, it was difficult for Case 1 to create capacity for this work. Case 1 participants reported difficulties working across silos and faculty indicated concerns about receiving support from senior level administrators. Case 1 administrators expressed concern and confusion about the progress of the teams and did not see the model as sustainable. These findings also echo the challenge Solano (n.d.) identifies while working with community colleges across the state of California. While the idea of Student Success Teams can make sense for an institution, the details of implementing these teams are vital for their ability to be launched successfully. Moreover, if these teams are not tied back to instruction, they may fail to support students in and out of the classroom (Solano, n.d.). While Case 1 was not able to launch a sustainable model, Case 2 shared more success with their launch. Case 2 used the term Completion Teams.

Within Case 2, the focus on launching Completion Teams aligned with advancing equity through Guided Pathways implementation. The teams were designed based on successful practices from affinity programs, aiming to provide comprehensive support to students within CAPs. These teams, comprised of counselors, faculty, administrators, and interns, aimed not only to connect students to services and resources, but also to foster a sense of belonging. This

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approach resonated with all participants, emphasizing the importance of building relationships and community to support student success and racial equity (Damschroder et al 2009; Hargreaves, 2022). In addition, events organized by the Completion Teams further enhanced student engagement and connection to their educational pathways. This study's findings highlight a stark contrast between these two cases. Case 2's ability to successfully launch Completion Teams in intentional and sustainable ways may be due to the strong relationships between the various key stakeholders across the college and because of their focus on creating community and sense of belonging. Case 2's early focus on building community and momentum for Guided Pathways based on their previous success may have been key to the overall positive implementation for Completion Teams. Hence, effectively implementing Guided Pathways relies heavily on building relationships, community and connecting with the work in ways that move beyond a policy mandate (Bonds, 2022). In this sense, Guided Pathways becomes a collective movement reliant on institutional change.

Learning from affinity programs. Both case participants emphasized the importance of expanding resources, programs, and support services to enhance the effectiveness of the Guided Pathways framework in promoting racial equity. Previous research has noted that the importance of enhancing communication and engagement among the college and students is vital to increase student success and support equity (Welter, 2020). Affinity programs provide students with more tailored support but are limited to the students who participate or join these programs. Therefore, both colleges intended to distinguish the best practices from various affinity programs and extend access to these services and programs to a broader range of students across campus. Case 2 notably exemplified this commitment through the expansion of affinity programs like Umoja Black Scholars and the Dream Resource Center, integrating identity-based support systems and

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best practices campus-wide. The college's president praised the impact of these programs, highlighting their alignment with Guided Pathways goals. Case 1, while lacking an Umoja program, established Black Scholars United (BSU) to similarly support Black student success within the Guided Pathways framework. However, Case 1 faced challenges in effectively promoting and expanding affinity programs, particularly concerning outreach to Latinx students, despite acknowledging their needs for equitable support. Loveland (2018) contends that increased support for Latinx students must consist of engagement with the broader community. Case 2 participants reported greater success in community outreach programs supporting students of color, such as the Black Excellence and Empowerment Summit. Overall, both cases underscored the significance of expanding programs and resources, modeled after affinity programs, to advance racial equity within the Guided Pathways framework.

Guided Pathways Implementation and Advancing Racial Equity

  Diverse perspectives on Guided Pathways and racial equity. The second research question in this study considered how participants recognized Guided Pathways in the context of racial equity. A significant finding was that the way each case implemented Guided Pathways affected their ability to connect it with racial equity and impacted the depth of their comprehension. Overall, there were various interpretations of the connection between Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity within Case 1. Despite some participants relaying that they had some knowledge of the vision of Guided Pathways supporting racial equity, several Case 1 participants had yet to witness this vision materialize at their college, revealing a gap between conceptual understanding and practical implementation. These findings echo Trinidad and Harper's (2022) recommendation to continuously engage in deep discussions around race to address the racialized dynamics on campuses.

Case 2 participants reported they have been reflecting on their methods of working toward holistic student success while also concentrating on specific racial equity integration opportunities by engaging in campus-wide conversations alongside their anti-racism task force colleagues. However, some Case 2 participants shared concerns about an "equity for all" approach, which may dilute the focus of addressing racial equity explicitly. Trinidad and Harper (2022) argue that raceless policies focused on "equity for all" not only fail to close racial equity gaps but often widen the gaps in outcomes. Most Case 2 participants were cognizant about this concern and discussed how their anti-racism work could help recenter racial equity as they work to advance Guided Pathways. Galan et al. (2023) contend that as colleges continue implementing Guided Pathways, there should be more reflection about how the redesign process can focus on the strengths of students of color and address the barriers they experience to recenter race in campus-wide dialogue.

Making Sense of Racial Equity in the Context of Guided Pathways Implementation

Racial equity as a process. Both cases articulated the concept of racial equity as a dynamic journey towards dismantling systemic barriers, requiring ongoing professional development, capacity building, and clarity on actionable steps. Participants in the study emphasized continuous reflection, learning, and action as essential elements in achieving racial equity within their campuses. They recognized the pervasive impact of racial equity work across all areas of the institution, emphasizing the need for faculty and staff to be sensitive to students' diverse needs and challenges stemming from societal inequalities. Despite acknowledging racial equity as a process, frustration was expressed regarding the inefficiency of strategies, with some likening it to "throwing spaghetti at the wall." However, participants highlighted the importance of adopting strategic, data-driven approaches to address disparities effectively. This aligns with

Bailey et al.'s (2015b) claim that data use assists in establishing buy-in and clarity around

Guided Pathways work. This study extends this claim by suggesting that data can also be used to

bridge the connection between the Guided Pathways framework and the process of advancing

racial equity. By identifying specific student populations, employing targeted interventions, and

assessing the impact, colleges can engage in this process more efficiently. These findings support

Dowd and Liera's (2018) conclusion that to sustain change efforts long-term policy makers and

local reformers should plan to iteratively redesign data tools, practices, and policies to institute

changes in everyday work procedures. This also underscores the necessity of sustained

engagement, collaboration, and adaptation in embracing racial equity as an ongoing data-driven

journey, with dialogue, professional development, and collective strategies playing integral roles

in fostering more racially equitable outcomes for students.

Racial equity as an outcome. The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office

(CCCCO) views the Guided Pathways framework to achieve racial equity through implementing

systematic supports and interventions to address disparities in student success. Both case studies

emphasized racial equity as an outcome, focusing on measurable progress in closing equity gaps

through data-driven reports submitted to the CCCCO, such as the Scale of Adoption Assessment

(SOAA), Student Equity and Achievement (SEA) plan, and Guided Pathways Workplan. These

programs aim to guide efforts related to Guided Pathways and equity within colleges. However,

there are challenges in understanding racial equity solely based on these plans' definitions and

parameters, with some participants suggesting that colleges may prioritize compliance over

genuine engagement with racial equity work. Despite efforts to integrate racial equity goals into

educational master plans, faculty members often feel disconnected from these plans due to

competing responsibilities and limited awareness. While disaggregated equity data can identify

specific student needs, the language and focus of plans may impact implementers' understanding of racial equity. Overreliance on state-wide plans may lead to generic definitions of equity, overlooking the nuances of racial disparities and systemic issues. While defining racial equity as an outcome offers clear goals and accountability, it may oversimplify complex issues that necessitates comprehensive strategies to address underlying systemic barriers effectively. This study's findings compliment Ching et al.'s (2020) call for colleges to move beyond articulating racial equity as just a quantifiable outcome and adopt an equity-minded framework that articulates racial equity work as a process of transformation involving shifting structures, cultures, and mind-sets. Without these elements, racial equity may only be used a lip service.

Racial equity as lip service. Scholars and practitioners have raised concerns about the dilution of equity initiatives, with terms like "equity" and "racial equity" often used as buzzwords to secure state grant funding (Felix & Trinidad, 2019). Campus leaders at both sites expressed apprehensions regarding the superficial treatment of racial equity, fearing it might be treated merely as lip service without genuine commitment or understanding. While Case 1 participants emphasized concerns about lip service and superficial measures, Case 2 took a more proactive stance, approaching racial equity through an anti-racist lens. In Case 1, there was uncertainty about senior leadership's prioritization of Guided Pathways and racial equity, with participants perceiving a lack of genuine commitment. This sentiment was echoed by concerns about the allocation of resources and the implementation of inclusive programming. Conversely, Case 2 participants recognized the importance of integrating equity from the foundation of new policies and structures, striving to avoid a top-down approach, and fostering open dialogue. This contrasting approach highlighted Case 2's commitment to meaningful engagement and proactive measures to dismantle racial inequities, in contrast to Case 1's concerns about lip service and

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superficial engagement. Despite both cases facing challenges in connecting Guided Pathways with racial equity, Case 2 demonstrated a stronger commitment to promoting real change and inclusivity within the organization. This study suggests that colleges must move beyond lip service when leveraging Guided Pathways as a tool for racial equity and commit to an anti-racist framework that examines and works to transform the institutional and systemic oppressive forces that people of color face in and out of the classroom (Kendi, 2019).

Challenges Advancing Racial Equity while Implementing Guided Pathways

      Funding and resources. Participants from both cases expressed concerns regarding the sustainability of Guided Pathways due to diminishing funding from the state and the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (CCCCO). While initial funding was instrumental in supporting key stakeholders for equity and institutional transformation work, there is apprehension about the long-term viability of these efforts without continued financial support. Uncertainty surrounding the renewal of positions and ongoing funding exacerbates these concerns, with participants highlighting the frustration of engaging in discussions without tangible outcomes amidst perceived contradictions between the importance of racial equity and insufficient support. Navigating inconsistent support presents a significant obstacle to advancing equity initiatives, with challenges extending beyond funding to encompass issues such as leadership dynamics and siloed work environments. As Felix (2021) found when examining the impact of student equity funds, when funding becomes more stable, communication can improve across equity related programs. In addition, silos are lessened, and more attention can be placed on evaluation to better understand how programs and initiatives can support equitable student outcomes (Felix, 2021). Overall, participants emphasized the need for sustained financial investment and organizational support to effectively drive meaningful change.

Leadership dynamics and silos. Case 1 participants expressed challenges with leadership and silos at their college. These dynamics had a significant impact on their ability to implement Guided Pathways and make progress with their racial equity goals. This study echoes previous research on Guided Pathways that notes that silos continue to be a barrier during implementation (Bailey-Hoffman, 2019). Within Case 1, resistance to change stemmed from organizational structures, with concerns raised about the lack of effective leadership at the senior level and the perceived disconnect from current conversations on equity. Participants highlighted silos across Academic Affairs, Student Services, and the Office of the President, hindering collaboration and coherence in Guided Pathways implementation. This segmented approach was seen as detrimental to student success, with administrators and faculty alike expressing the need for greater unity and involvement across departments to effectively advance Guided Pathways and promote racial equity. Breaking down silos and fostering transparency emerged as crucial steps toward achieving these goals.

Recommendations

The Possibilities of Guided Pathways and Racial Equity

The Guided Pathways framework calls for a redesign around how colleges are organized to maximize the potential for students to reach their end goals with a particular focus around pursuing a career and transfer to a four-year college (CCCCO, n.d.e). While this vision focuses on improving our colleges and providing more opportunities for students to do well, the framework does not acknowledge the persistence systems of oppression that remain active within our institutions. Furthermore, the enduring impact of larger dominant ideologies, such as colonialism, capitalism and whiteness on educational systems is profound and multifaceted and continues to exist (Padilla & Bush, 2022). Colonial legacies persist through Eurocentric curricula

and unequal access to education, perpetuating disparities in knowledge and opportunity (Padilla & Bush, 2022). Capitalist ideologies commodify education, prioritizing market-driven goals over holistic learning and reinforcing economic inequalities (Rose et al., 2019). Whiteness shapes educational norms, centering white experiences and marginalizing people of color in curriculum content and hiring practices, while systemic racism perpetuates disparities in discipline and achievement (Kendi, 2019). Hegemonic ideologies uphold existing power structures, reproducing social inequalities and maintaining the myth of meritocracy (Garcia, 2022). Addressing these entrenched dynamics necessitates recognizing and challenging historical and structural injustices to foster more inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive educational environments (Trinidad & Harper, 2022). This must also occur while implementing Guided Pathways to advance racial equity.

A significant problem within our educational system is the tendency to prioritize traditional schooling methods over fostering genuine education (Rose, 2009). In essence, educational institutions often prioritize conditioned learning and conformity to established norms rather than promoting holistic development among students that represent their cultural identity and lived experiences, especially for students of color. As a result, this emphasis on schooling rather than contextualized education may contribute to the perpetuation of inequitable outcomes, as students may not be adequately supported throughout their educational journey impacting their ability to meet their goals (Rose, 2009). Thus, if those implementing Guided Pathways address the larger systems at play that impact students of color, this framework may be used as a clear tool to support racial equity. As seen within Case 2, when a college connects their anti-racism work to their Guided Pathways work, they can sustain more progress at transforming their institution.

Advancing racial equity through Guided Pathways requires a holistic approach that acknowledges the complexities of systemic inequities within educational systems. These implications aim to empower educators and institutions to embrace transformative practices that challenge the status quo, dismantle barriers to success, and create inclusive learning environments where all students can thrive. By centering equity in curriculum design, instructional practices, student support services, and institutional policies, educators can foster a culture of belonging and empowerment that promotes equitable outcomes for racially marginalized students. These implications emphasize the importance of capacity building, professional development, and collective action in driving meaningful change and advancing racial equity within higher education. Centralizing racial equity in Guided Pathways goes beyond implementing the activities associated with each pillar. Colleges must make deeper connections.

To make deeper connections between Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity, practitioners can contextualize their experiences and perceptions within the context of community colleges as a racialized organization (Ray, 2019). McCambly et al. (2023) argue that acknowledging community colleges as racialized organizations challenges the idea that we are participating in a culturally and race neutral environment. Understanding community colleges as a racialized organization opposes the traditional notion that views these institutions as culturally neutral spaces. Without deep consideration of contextual conditions that shape organizational policies and practices, racially inequitable outcomes are viewed as a condition of student deficits rather than structural issues. The following recommendations are inspired by what community college practitioners can do to acknowledge our organizational contexts as a racialized space and provides racially focused responses to support institutional change.

Centralize racial equity in Guided Pathways implementation. Racial equity is a process of eliminating racial disparities and improving outcomes for students of color (Boateng, 2020). Chase et al. (2020) argues that for an equity policy to truly be a successful tool for racial equity that racially minoritized students need to be at the center of its focus and implementation. Still, Felix and Trinidad (2019) articulate that too often, "well intentioned," educational policies that seek to address racial inequity fail to achieve their desired results. They argue that policies, mandates, and implementation guidelines must be developed that are race conscious. Furthermore, they call for policymakers, state-level actions, and implementers to practice equity-mindedness, which requires an awareness of how policies that may seem race-neutral may be participating and reinforcing practices that continue to reproduce inequitable outcomes for racially-minoritized students (Bensimon, 2007). To achieve racial equity, colleges must centralize racial equity into their Guided Pathways implementation.

While advancing equity was an underlying focus for applying Guided Pathways, the implementation began prior and in response to racial uprisings after the killing of George Floyd and many other unarmed Black individuals and people of color across the United States. Because implementation began before both cases revised their mission, vision, and value statements to commit to racial equity more explicitly, both cases were at different stages of establishing deeper connections between Guided Pathways and their racial equity work. Based on the findings of this study, colleges should make a concerted effort re-center racial equity.

Guided Pathways attends to clarifying students' educational goals by creating clear curricular pathways that lead to future education and employment. Both cases focused on creating CAPs and mapping these pathways for students. Nevertheless, racial equity was not an immediate emphasis while creating and mapping these pathways. This study echoes the

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recommendations articulated by Rose et al. (2009), which suggests that an effective strategy for student retention and success within these pathways is to use equity-focused labor market data to inform course content and pedagogical practices. In addition, this study's findings support Bonds's (2022) recommendation to disaggregate and analyze enrollment data by race/ethnicity within CAPs to better understand how students of color are enrolling in specific pathways. Practitioners should also consider how they recruit and advise students into their CAPs to develop a more race-conscious and equity-minded understanding of their practices' impact on students of color. The findings of this study suggests that if Guided Pathways is going to be a tool for advancing racial equity, practitioners must move beyond lip service and critically examine how implementation can address inequitable outcomes. Using racial equity as mere lip service undermines the integrity and effectiveness of Guided Pathways.

Adopt an anti-racist framework. As seen in Case 2 of this study, adopting an anti-racist framework while implementing Guided Pathways can support racial equity efforts. Colleges should prioritize adopting an anti-racist framework when applying Guided Pathways to advance racially equitable outcomes for all students. This approach acknowledges the historical and systemic barriers that marginalized communities face within higher education systems. By centering racial equity, colleges can actively work to dismantle discriminatory practices and policies that perpetuate disparities in student success. This includes critically examining existing structures and processes within Guided Pathways implementation to identify and address any biases or barriers that may disproportionately affect students of color. Additionally, colleges should prioritize culturally responsive pedagogies, support services, and resources that acknowledge and affirm the diverse backgrounds and experiences of students (Abdi & Cuomo, 2020). Moreover, fostering inclusive campus climates where all students feel valued and

supported is essential for creating an environment conducive to academic success and creating a

deeper sense of belonging. By adopting an anti-racist framework, colleges can ensure that

Guided Pathways initiatives are not only effective in promoting student achievement but also

contribute to broader efforts to advance racial equity within higher education.

Build capacity. Both cases in this study discussed the need for more capacity to do this

work. Building capacity around racial equity work while implementing Guided Pathways

requires a multifaceted approach that integrates professional development, institutional policies,

and community engagement. Colleges should invest in comprehensive training programs for

faculty, staff, and administrators to deepen their understanding of systemic racism, unconscious

bias, and culturally responsive practices. This training should include opportunities for critical

self-reflection and skill-building to effectively address racial inequities within the context of

Guided Pathways. Additionally, colleges should establish clear policies and procedures that

prioritize equity and hold individuals and departments accountable for advancing racial justice

goals. Collaborating with community stakeholders, including students, local organizations, and

advocacy groups, can also provide valuable insights and support for implementing racially

equitable practices within Guided Pathways. Furthermore, college leaders must recognize the

time and space required for racial equity work and provide opportunities for promoting growth

and fostering dialogue. By forming a culture of continuous learning, accountability, and

collaboration, colleges can effectively build capacity around racial equity work and ensure that

Guided Pathways initiatives promote equitable outcomes for all students.

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Implications

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Implications for Practice

Advancing racial equity through Guided Pathways requires a multifaceted approach that extends beyond surface-level interventions and in turn, challenges the status quo of educational systems. It necessitates a fundamental shift in mindset and practice, recognizing that racial equity work is inherently about changing hearts and minds. Case 2's ability to have more opportunities for campus-wide dialogue about racial equity and anti-racism seemed to keep the Guided Pathways work grounded in equity. In addition, educators must engage in critical self-reflection and confront their own biases and assumptions to create truly inclusive learning environments. This requires a commitment to challenging and disrupting systemic inequities, as well as advocating for radical changes within institutions to dismantle barriers to success for racially marginalized students.

Central to this work is capacity building and professional development. Educators need opportunities to develop their knowledge, skills, and awareness of equity-centered pedagogies, culturally responsive teaching, and anti-racist practices. Most participants at both cases discussed a concern about having the capacity to engage in racial equity work due to the many obligations and responsibilities they have in their current roles. However, research suggests that racial equity must be embedded into everything we do rather than seeing this work as something that is in addition to our various duties (Felix & Castro, 2018). To support this vision, professional development initiatives should provide space for deep reflection, dialogue, and learning, empowering educators to implement transformative practices that promote racial equity in their daily work. Additionally, institutional support for capacity building efforts, such as dedicated resources, time for collaboration and learning communities, and recognition of equity-focused professional development, is essential to sustain momentum and foster meaningful change.

Moreover, advancing racial equity through Guided Pathways requires a collective "why" around the work—a shared understanding and commitment to the importance of creating equitable educational opportunities for all students. This was a major finding of this research study. Having a collective purpose serves as a driving force behind efforts to challenge systemic injustices, advocate for policy changes, and create inclusive learning environments. By cultivating a sense of shared responsibility and solidarity among educators, administrators, students, and community stakeholders, institutions can mobilize collective action towards achieving racial equity goals. Ultimately, this transformative approach to Guided Pathways holds the potential to not only address disparities in educational outcomes but also to foster a culture of equity, justice, and belonging within higher education.

Implications for Policy

The CCCCO introduced Guided Pathways as a holistic approach to higher education reform, emphasizing four key pillars. First, it focused on providing clear, structured educational pathways, ensuring students have a roadmap from entry to completion. Second, it emphasized the importance of structured support services, ensuring students receive comprehensive assistance to overcome barriers and succeed academically. Third, it aimed to empower students with the information necessary to make informed choices about their academic and career pathways, fostering greater agency and self-direction. Last, it emphasized the need for integrated interventions, coordinating institutional resources and practices to create a cohesive environment conducive to student success and completion (CCCCO, n.d.e). This approach aimed to transform the educational experience, enhancing equity and outcomes for all students across the state.

While the CCCCO created the Scale of Adoption Assessment (SOAA) to measure the progress of Guided Pathways, the SOAA failed to address the deeper layers of equity work that

is required for a policy mandate to address racially inequitable outcomes. While the policy mandate may provide frameworks for structured pathways, support services, and informed choices, it does not address the systemic and structural factors that perpetuate racial disparities in educational attainment. Addressing racially inequitable outcomes necessitates a comprehensive approach that goes beyond surface-level interventions. This includes addressing institutionalized racism, implicit biases, socioeconomic inequalities, and historical inequities embedded within educational systems (Felix & Trinidad, 2019). Without confronting these deeper layers of equity work, policy mandates such as Guided Pathways may only scratch the surface of the complex issues contributing to racial disparities in education. Thus, there is a pressing need for policies and initiatives that engage in critical dialogue, structural reforms, and community partnerships aimed at dismantling systemic barriers and fostering true equity and inclusion in higher education. If policies, such as Guided Pathways are going to be designed and framed to address racial equity, the framing of these policies and how they are articulated, organized, mapped, and communicated must include a connection between the implementation and these larger issues around racial equity and transformation (Galan, 2023).

Limitations of Study

Every study has limitations that frame the results of its findings. This study was limited by the participants that were interviewed. Interviewing students or those who are not responsible for Guided Pathways implementation may provide additional information. Furthermore, the sites of my study were within a large, urban, multi-college district. Factors such as institutional culture, student demographics, and resources may vary significantly in other contexts, potentially impacting the applicability of the findings. Last, I conducted this study while colleges are still receiving funding for Guided Pathways implementation. Studying implementation in the future

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especially as funding and policies within CCCs change may yield different findings. While the study presents some limitations, the purpose of this study is to enhance an understanding of Guided Pathways implementation with a focus on racial equity by investigating the experiences and perceptions of key informants responsible for leading systemic change across multiple community colleges within a single district. Now that several limitations have been discussed, I will share recommendations for future research.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study contributes to the body of research on Guided Pathways implementation at California community colleges. While previous research has focused on various elements of Guided Pathways, few empirical studies have explored the relationship between Guided Pathways and racial equity. Future research could investigate this relationship using a mixed method study employing a survey to collect data about how Guided Pathways is being implemented across the state and then follow up with qualitative interviews to understand individual experiences. By collecting quantitative data on the impact of Guided Pathways, researchers can assess the extent to which racial equity considerations are integrated into implementation efforts and the impact on a college's outcomes.

Future research could also examine a single-college district to see if similar themes occur. Examining a single-college district within the context of Guided Pathways implementation offers valuable insights that complement broader multi-site studies. By focusing on a specific college, researchers can conduct a more in-depth analysis of the unique contextual factors, challenges, and successes shaping Guided Pathways implementation within that setting. Ultimately, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of racial equity

work within higher education and provides specific recommendations to support more equitable outcomes for all students, regardless of institutional demographics.

Dissemination of My Research

I plan to share my findings with the faculty and administrative leaders at my community college and district. Findings on the relationship between Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity will be useful to those implementing the framework, especially as colleges continue to focus on student equity and prepare for the new Student-Centered Funding Formula, which is partly based on student completion. Increasing student completion rates and closing equity gaps is not only beneficial for students but also for colleges, which will financially benefit from increased funding due to increased student success. I also plan to use this study's findings to create professional development opportunities focused on Guided Pathways implementation and racial equity initiatives. Last, as a current community college leader, I will use these findings to guide my efforts toward fostering and sustaining long term racial equity centered initiatives at my institution and hopefully, across other California community college campuses.

Reflection

The origin of this research study came from a deep sense of frustration and concern about the progress that we were making regarding advancing racial equity among California community colleges more broadly, but specifically at my own college. As a first-generation California community college student, I understand firsthand the positive impact that community colleges can have on people's lives. Attending a community college gave me a second chance and an opportunity to pursue higher education despite barely graduating high school. I struggled throughout my high school journey because of factors outside of the classroom. My family was navigating a divorce and difficult financial circumstances, and I found myself trying to

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understand my intersectional identities growing up in a mixed-race family. I saw firsthand the differences between my white, Italian American father and my Puerto Rican mother. I saw how each side of my family faced similar and different struggles in part because of their various intersectional identities. I tried to make sense of these experiences in the context of my own life.

When I began my educational journey at a community college, I experienced an educational system that was attempting to provide more equitable opportunities despite coming from a background that may not have provided the support, resources, or systems necessary to foster success in and out of the classroom. As I worked full-time to support myself and tried to attend college, it took me four years rather than two to complete my general education courses to transfer to a four-year university. During my time at community college, I noticed a variety of institutional barriers, including a lack of clarity around how to navigate student services, financial aid, tutoring, and gaining access to resources that would help clarify my educational pathway and support me throughout this journey. During my undergraduate and graduate programs, I learned about critical theory and studied issues around race, gender, sexuality, and identity, which provided a framework and paradigm for how to contextualize the student experience from a social justice lens. After graduate school, I made a commitment to go back to the CCC system to give back to an institution that provided me with a prosperous future. My goal was to join a community of hard-working and dedicated individuals to improve this system and better support students who often have limited resources and options for higher education.

The year I became a full-time faculty member, the CCC system was undergoing several key initiatives discussed in this study, including AB 705, the new Student-Centered Funding Formula, the launch of the *Vision for Success* and Guided Pathways. It was both a challenging and exciting time to begin my career in this new role. I immediately bought into the vision of

Guided Pathways to transform our institution to better serve our students. The data was clear to me. Despite many students wanting to obtain a certificate, degree, or transfer, less than half of students achieved their goal after six years. I was inspired by a vision that focused on changing the system rather than positioning this as a student problem or using student deficit language to explain why students were not able to achieve their intended goal. I too had experienced these systemic barriers and understood that based on my own intersectional identities, I had privileges that others did not. My hope was to work together with faculty, administrators, and staff at my college to implement Guided Pathways to become the best college we could be with a focus on increasing student success and completion for all those we serve.

I quickly became a faculty leader on my campus. I was one of the inaugural faculty and Guided Pathways navigators supporting implementation and inquiry. I also became active on campus-wide committees, became the Dialogue Assessment Coordinator, then the Student Learning Outcome Coordinator, Faculty Accreditation Chair, Open Educational Resource (OER) Liaison, Academic Senate Representative, District Academic Senate Representative, Educational Master Plan Co-Chair, Tri-Chair of the Racial Equity and Social Justice Task Force, Vice Chair of my division, College Council member, Curriculum Committee member, served on the professional learning committee and pursued an extensive amount of professional development around teaching, learning, and equity. I also served as an interim and acting Dean of Academic Affairs supervising over half of the college including the Distance Education Office during an ongoing pandemic and global crisis when our college was mostly offering remote education. As we experienced the COVID-19 Pandemic and the national racial reckoning of continuously watching Black individuals being brutally murdered by police brutality, these experiences had a significant impact on the communities we serve. As we all navigated this social and political

context and continued the work of implementing Guided Pathways, I saw the CCCCO, my college district and my own college start to make deeper connections between Guided Pathways and advancing racial equity, especially among the Chancellors and Vice Chancellors in our system. During state-wide webinars, reports, briefs, and trainings, the CCCCO was advocating that Guided Pathways could not only transform our system, but also close racial equity gaps and that became a major goal for the entire system including my college and district. Yet, despite these claims, I did not always experience clear connections between Guided Pathways and the racial equity work happening on my campus. And, when discussing with state-wide leaders, administrators and faculty across our system, there seemed to be various understanding of how Guided Pathways could support racial equity and concern that this connection was superficial and that the Guided Pathways framework would continue to perpetuate neoliberal capitalistic policies that would reinforce inequitable outcomes. Yet, despite a few preliminary briefs and a recent report examining the discourse of college planning documents through a content analysis, few studies explored the connection between Guided Pathways and racial equity even as the CCCCO's website and *Vision for Success* argued the framework is being implemented to achieve racially equitable outcomes. Even with the launch of *Vision 2030,* these connections continued to be unclear to me and while they were discussed from a high-level perspective, I was interested in getting a deeper understanding of the experiences of individuals implementing this framework.

While conducting interviews with participants, it became clear that this topic was both interesting and sensitive for those who participated in this study. Participants seemed excited to have conversations about Guided Pathways and discuss what they have been working on over the last couple of years. They seemed to want an opportunity to share their successes and the challenges that they faced while implementing this work. Participants also acknowledged

ongoing frustration with trying to scale their efforts across their college and getting continued support from the CCCCO via funding and from senior administrators. Participants were vulnerable during the interviews, especially those who seemed to struggle with racial equity and making these connections for themselves.

I want to honor all the voices in this study because despite any challenges they may have faced, each of these individuals continues to work hard to better support our students and while these findings suggest various understandings and connections between Guided Pathways and racial equity, each participant communicated a deep passion and care for the work they do and an eagerness to make our system better. This brings me back to my own experience as a California community college student and now a faculty member and campus leader. We will not always get it right the first time, but the overwhelming ongoing commitment to continuous improvement and the challenging work required to transform a system deeply rooted in pervasive, systemic issues, such as racism, is clear. Individuals across the CCC system are working hard to advance racial equity. This study strives to provide greater insight into how individuals are going about this work and how to continue to improve these efforts to create more racially equitable outcomes for the diverse students we serve.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction and Consent Language

I appreciate your willingness to participate in my research. I want to start with the verbal consent information. The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between Guided Pathways implementation and achieving racially equity at California community colleges. Participation in this study in voluntary.

The content of the interview will be confidential, and your identity will not be disclosed. My research is not dependent on the success or failure of any of the change efforts being attempted at your college. Furthermore, I want to clarify that I am serving as an objective researcher during this interview rather than a colleague or supervisor.

The interview should take an hour or less.

Our conversation will be audio recorded, so I can make a transcript of our conversation and I will be recording our Zoom session. After our Zoom session recording is available, I will immediately delete the video recording and keep the audio recording on a secured device for transcription purposes. Any quotes I use from our interview will be assigned a pseudonym and no participant names or identifying features will be used in writing up the study.

The researchers will do their best to make sure that your private information is kept confidential. Information about you will be handled as confidentially as possible, but participating in research may involve a loss of privacy and the potential for a breach of confidentiality. Study data will be physically and electronically secured. As with any use of electronic means to store data, there is a risk of breach of data security. Your data, including de-identified data may be kept for use in future research.

May I record this interview? [Pause for verbal consent]

Do you have any questions you would like me to answer before we begin? [Pause for answer.]

[Start recording devices and Zoom recording.]

Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little about your professional background and how you came to your current position.

Probe: How long have you held this position?

Probe: Please briefly describe what other positions in academia or elsewhere you have held prior to your current position and for approximately how long.

Probe: Can you share how your current position relates to Guided Pathways implementation at your college?

Probe: Can you share how your current position supports advancing racial equity at your college?

2. Can you describe how Guided Pathways implementation began at your college?

Probe: Who were the key leaders or influencers at the beginning of implementation?

Probe: Were there any challenges while beginning to implement Guided Pathways? If yes, can you tell me more about those challenges?

3. Regarding the first pillar of Guided Pathways, "clarifying the pathways to end goals," what activities and/or policies has the college pursued and/or prioritized during implementation?

Probe: How do you know what is prioritized?

Probe: What is the progress of these activities and policies?

4. Regarding the second pillar of Guided Pathways, "help students choose and enter pathways," are you aware of what activities and/or policies the college has pursued and/or prioritized during implementation?

Probe: How do you know what is prioritized?

Probe: What is the progress of these activities and policies?

5. How has your college defined racial equity?

Probe: What is your definition of racial equity?

Probe: How, if at all, does your definition of racial equity differ from your college's definition?

Probe: How, if at all, has your lived experiences and your racial identity influenced your

   definition of racial equity?

Probe: Has your definition of racial equity changed or evolved over time?

6. In your position, how do you, if at all, make connections between Guided Pathways

   implementation and achieving racially equitable student outcomes?

Probe: Has your definition of racial equity changed or evolved over time during Guided

Pathways implementation? If so, how?

7. What role, if any, do you think Guided Pathways can play in promoting racial equity at your

college?

8. Based on your experience, what activities and policies do you perceive the college has pursued

to address racial disparities in student outcomes while implementing Guided Pathways?

9. Are you familiar with the activities and policies discussed in major planning documents, such

as the college's Educational Master Plan, Student Equity and Achievement plan, the Scale of

Adoption Assessment (SOAA), and the Guided Pathways workplan? If so, can you tell me about

how Guided Pathways implementation and the college's racial equity goals are related to these

documents?

10. Based on your experience, what challenges, if any, do you think the college faces while working towards achieving racially equitable outcomes?

Probe: How, if at all, do you think the college has addressed these challenges?

11. Based on your experience, how, if at all, do you perceive the college measuring success in achieving racially equitable outcomes?

Probe: What indicators does or could the college use to evaluate progress?

Probe: In your position, do you use quantitative and qualitative data to identify racialized patterns of practice and outcomes? If so, how?

12. What resources and support do you need to continue your work towards achieving racially equitable student outcomes?

13. How do you envision the future of Guided Pathways implementation in achieving racially equitable outcomes and what steps do you think need to be taken to get there?

14. Is there anything else you would like to share on this topic?

Thank you so much for your time and participation.

I will be transcribing this interview in the next few days, and I can offer you the option to review the recording transcript. Please contact me before October 1, 2023, if you would like to review the transcript.

And thank you for your time.

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