CENTERING EQUITY IN STUDENT SUCCESS TEAMS

#3 IN THE *BREAKING IT ALL DOWN* SERIES

This is a companion to **Student Success Teams: An Implementation Guide for Community Colleges**, which is based on over 80 interviews at nine colleges in three states.

This document draws on examples from our original dataset to illustrate important considerations related to SST design.

April 2022

STUDENT SUCCESS TEAMS

AN IMPLEMENTATION GUIDE FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES
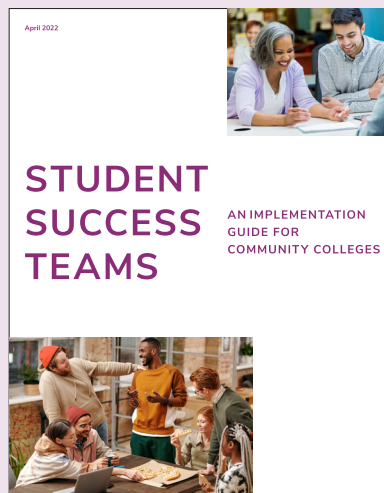
EQUITY AND SSTs

Most of our interviewees conceived of SSTs as a strategy to improve equitable outcomes at their college, in large part because the SST approach builds on the success of existing, smaller, cohort-based programs that support students from racially-minoritized, low-income, and/or first generation college-going backgrounds.[1] However, many were not convinced SSTs would effectively do so, or worried that SSTs would pull students away from existing culturally-responsive cohort programming.

Interviewees were clear that equitable intent is not enough. **Without explicit attention to equity during all phases of design and implementation, SSTs run the risk of being performative rather than impactful.** A number of colleges in our study shared SST design and implementation strategies that centered equity to support racially-minoritized, low-income, first-generation students, and/or other groups historically excluded from higher education.

This document digs more deeply into three different approaches to building equity-forward SSTs.[2] **We provide three case studies of colleges**, each using a different approach to making equitable outcomes a focus of their SSTs:

1. Embedding equity directly into SSTs

2. Using a tiered approach to connect SSTs and cohort programs

3. Creating SSTs that support cohorts of students from specific racial, ethnic, or economic backgrounds

Regardless of approach, our study found making SSTs an equity strategy takes deliberate work. Throughout each phase of planning and implementation, be sure to routinize discussions of race, class, and power. **Ask yourself what the implication of your actions will be for your most structurally disadvantaged students at every juncture.**

Equity is a process by which campus practices, programs, and mindsets shift such that students' educational experiences and outcomes are not predetermined by their racial, economic, or social backgrounds.

As you reflect on each vignette, ask yourselves:

1. What is your reaction to this college's approach? What are the pros and cons?

2. What would it take to use this approach at your college?

3. How would you use this college's approach to ensure that racially-minoritized, low-income, and/or first-generation students are well-supported by your SST design?

4. What else would you need to think about to create an equity-forward SST?

We also provide additional questions relevant to specific approaches at the end of each vignette. These are questions that emerged for the colleges themselves as they wrestled with design and implementation. As with many aspects of transformative change, there are no easy answers. We elevate these questions to prompt your thinking about ways you might approach design tensions and challenges at your own institution.
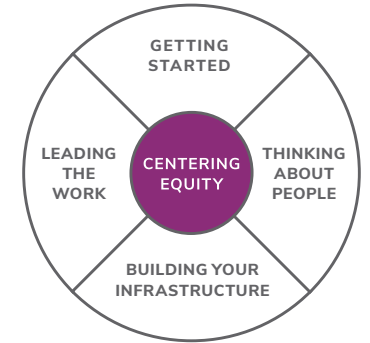
[1] In this document, we use the phrase "racially-minoritized, low-income, and first-generation" to refer to the groups of students who are structurally disadvantaged by our educational institutions. We acknowledge that higher education was also not designed for — and often actively worked to exclude — many other groups of students, including but not limited to students who are part-time, differently-abled, LGBTQ+, gender expansive, parenting, foster care-involved, military-connected, or justice-impacted. All of these groups may need to be the focus of equity-forward efforts.

[2] See our *Implementation Guide* (p. 7-8 and 12-13) for additional equity strategies identified in our study.

EMBEDDING EQUITY INTO THE DAY-TO-DAY

Eastern PA Medium-Large CC (ECC) is embedding attention to equity directly into the daily work of its SSTs to ensure that teams make closing gaps across student groups the central focus.[3] They want to ensure that decisions and interventions are made using data and with an eye towards understanding which students might be negatively impacted. One leader said, "You can't just say, 'I think.' You gotta back it up."

To do this work, SSTs are grounded in academic communities and are composed of faculty, academic advisors, counselors, and support staff who use a variety of institutional data sources to identify areas of challenge as part of their regular team meetings. These data include metrics and disaggregated measures, such as course withdrawal rates or course substitution patterns. **They then ask themselves, "Who do we need to talk to about this?" in order to understand potential underlying causes of identified challenges or troubling findings.** This process helps them identify institutional policies or practices that inhibit student success. The SST works to develop alternate approaches that might remedy the problem.

Critically, the focus on equity within each team discussion moves "equity" from something that is done by a handful of individuals to something that is the responsibility of the institution and roles within it. It also **normalizes equity-forward discussions**, and the emphasis on action means that conversations do not become merely "box checking." One SST leader described the result of embedded equity work by saying, "Faculty who are involved are energized by training, committed to doing work, and empowered."

To further routinize their equity-forward decision-making, ECC is implementing a department-based Equity Coach to support their SSTs. Equity Coaches will be a faculty member on extended time release, who has been trained to examine data and explain it to their colleagues. Equity Coaches will participate in training institutes to build their equity-mindedness and data skills. They will be expected to push their colleagues to think about what they will do with data. "Data for data's sake isn't acceptable."

Embedding equity in the day-to-day is not always easy. To create SSTs that deliberately put equity at the center of all their work and decision-making, ECC had to:

1. Learn to navigate the defensiveness individuals often display when presented with troubling data. They stopped focusing on what was wrong, and started focusing on possible solutions.

2. Invest in professional learning for Equity Coaches and the campus community at-large. In particular, they worked to help individuals understand that data were not about them as individuals, but about systems.

Eastern Pennsylvania
Large City
Student Body

>15K

■ White ■ Black ■ Hispanic
■ Asian ■ Native American
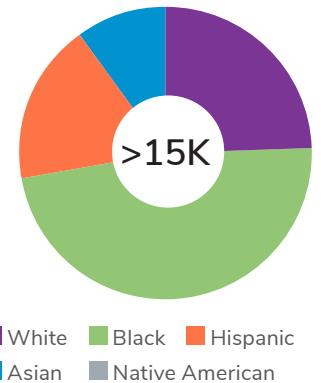
[3] ECC uses a *Backend Coordinating Team* model. This means that their teams work behind the scenes to assess and address cohort-based system and structure-level issues, in order to streamline and improve programming and policies.

See the *Implementation Guide* or our *Understanding Different Types of Student Success Teams* document for more information about the different types of teams.

CONNECTING TO EXISTING COHORT PROGRAMS

Central CA Medium CC (CCM) has seen a positive impact from their robust set of cohort-based equity programs. They believe in the efficacy of holistic student support, and want to provide such supports to all students. A college leader said, **"We know they work for our most marginalized students but we have thousands of other vulnerable students."** SSTs were their answer — though the college is also cognizant that they do not want to lose the power of more targeted cohort programming.

To address the tension between small programs and scale, **CCM has "braided" their SSTs with their cohort-based equity programming.** SSTs are connected to the college's metamajors, and all students are assigned to a metamajor-based SST.[4] This does not prevent their participation in cohort-based equity programming, however. Students in programs like EOPS, Calworks, or Puente are also assigned a program counselor, from whom they receive the majority of their holistic support. These students thus have access to metamajor SST programming, and cohort-based equity programming and support.

Metamajor-based SSTs include counseling faculty, academic faculty, intervention specialists, and data coaches. The teams work together to build cross-functional relationships, develop programming for students, and identify metamajor-based policy and practice challenges. Counselors also focus their work on students in their metamajors to inch towards case management.

CCM's model relies heavily on the use of warning flags via the Starfish early warning system. The college has developed a detailed set of permissions and workflows for the flags, creating a hierarchy of intervention. **Students in cohort programs are sent to their program counselor first;** not only does this preserve their access to and relationship with cohort-based equity programming, but it frees up time for metamajor-based SST counselors to reach out to students who are not in a program but still need holistic support.

At the same time, CCM is working to ensure that students in metamajor SSTs receive culturally-responsive support. They have invested in professional learning to help counseling faculty build connections across racial and ethnic groups, increase their cultural awareness, and "normaliz[e] faculty and imposter syndrome." They hope these SST-based approaches will drive improved outcomes for racially-minoritized, low-income and first-generation students who are not directly enrolled in cohort-based equity programs.

> **CCM worked carefully to both preserve and scale equity-forward holistic support, but in doing so, confronted a number of tensions.**
>
> 1. How can metamajor SSTs learn from cohort programs to provide holistic student support at scale?
>
> 2. Metamajor-based SSTs had to fundamentally rethink their structure, since they were moving from generalist support to targeted engagement. But the cohort programs also had to think about what they would change to connect with metamajors and streamline supports. What should cohort programs — which are mandated to provide services "over and above" campus business-as-usual — do differently once all students receive proactive outreach and holistic support?
>
> 3. The college had to build a robust data and technology infrastructure to support coding students by program and SST in order to triage warning flags and connect students to the right support.[5]

Central California
Distant Town
Student Body
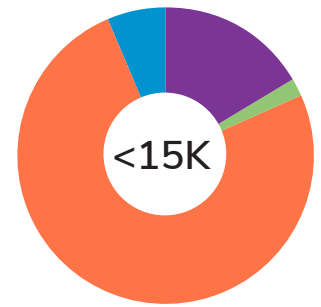
- ■ White
- ■ Black
- ■ Hispanic
- ■ Asian
- ■ Native American

[4] CCM uses a Networked Support SST model. This means that a cross-functional group of team members create an easily identifiable network students can go to for support; team members communicate with one another to streamline and integrate their activities as they provide cohort management.

[5] See the *Implementation Guide* (p. 29-32) for more information on building data and technology infrastructure.

LEVERAGING CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE PROGRAMMING

Southern CA Medium-Large CC8 (SCC) is a Hispanic-serving institution with a significant population of Black students. **Rather than connect Student Success Teams to academic communities, the college has opted to ground them in cohorts of students from specific racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic backgrounds.**[6] The SSTs consist of assigned counselors who serve as networked single points of contact, supported behind the scenes by the college's Assemblies. Assemblies are affinity groups led by college staff in partnership with student leaders. They function similarly to clubs and provide racially-minoritized and structurally disadvantaged students with a sense of community, culturally-responsive programming, and connections to support services.

SSTs are new at SCC, and the college is taking a pilot-to-scale approach. **Their first SST is connected to the Black Student Assembly (BSA) because the college's data indicate that Black students are disproportionally negatively impacted by institutional policies and practices.** Currently, the SST consists of two counselors who support a caseload that, collectively, includes all self-identified Black students in the college. Both SST counselors also self-identify as Black, enabling them to leverage shared lived experiences with the students they support.

SST counselors deliver targeted and culturally-responsive counseling, academic planning workshops, proactive outreach, and supportive relationships to students who self-identify as part of their assigned cohort. **The counselors coordinate with Assembly leaders to provide warm hand-offs, additional information, and stronger connections between academic and non-academic supports.** As one counselor explained, they send the message to students, "We got you."

In building the SST, team members have been intentional in working with BSA student members to identify what it should look like and how the Assembly can connect to and complement the holistic advising and counseling provided by the SST. One SST member explained, "We want the student voices to lead us in where we want to go with this."

The college is cognizant that students often hold multiple identities. Thus, students may opt to be served by the BSA-connected SST and any other affinity programs to which they might belong (e.g., MESA or athletics). Warning flags are triaged in order of whichever program has the strictest set of requirements. Students can have multiple counselors — and choose to go to the counselor with whom they connect most strongly.

As SCC moves from a single SST to scale, the college has encountered additional important questions about the best way to design equity-forward SSTs:

1. Should affinity-based SSTs be opt-in or should students be required to meet with their affinity-assigned counselor? Mandatory approaches may create mistrust if students feel they are being recruited because of their race or ethnicity; opt-in approaches risk missing students who might benefit from culturally-responsive advising and counseling.

2. What is the best way to reach out to students so that they see the SST as an enhancement, not a presumption that they will need "extra help" to be successful in college?

3. Which affinity groups would benefit from SSTs, and what does a scaled model look like? How many affinity SSTs makes sense?

Southern California
Large Suburb
Student Body

>15K
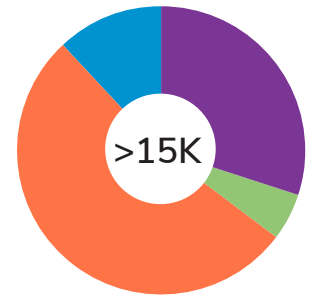
■ White ■ Black ■ Hispanic
■ Asian ■ Native American

[6] SCC uses a *Networked Single Point of Contact* model. This means that students connect with a single point person for personalized, holistic case management. This point person is in turn supported by a network of colleagues for warm handoffs and follow up.

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This project was generously funded by The College Futures Foundation.

Want to learn more? Visit **www.phasetwoadvisory.com/sst-guide**