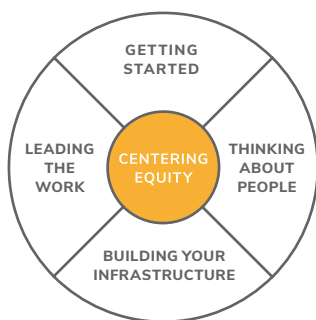# CENTERING EQUITY

5 Programs like EOPS, Puente, MESA, and Umoja are federal, state, or local programs designed to support cohorts of students using culturally-responsive pedagogies and practices, additional financial supports, and/or tailored advising. Other cohort programs might include those for foster youth or veterans.

6 See, for example, Messier, V.J., Williams, S.A., Hall, N., & Visueta, V. (2018). *Evaluation of the Umoja Community.*

An equity-forward perspective means looking beyond aggregate success rates to find ways to use SSTs to help ensure that students' backgrounds do not predetermine their outcomes.

Equity at the Root of SSTs

SSTs are an attempt to build on the effective work done for decades by smaller, cohort-based programs. These existing cohort programs, including TRIO, EOPS, Puente, MESA and Umoja,[5] provide holistic supports to groups of students from racially-minoritized, low-income, and/or first-generation college-going backgrounds. The strength of these programs form much of the rationale for expanding a holistic support approach across a college community.[6]

From our perspective, **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 background. In this document, we use the phrase "racially-minoritized, low-income, and first-generation college-going students" to refer to the groups of students who are currently disadvantaged by our educational institutions. We acknowledge the many types of students for whom higher education was not designed, including, but not limited to, those who are Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and Asian-Pacific Islander, as well as students who are low-income, first-generation college-going, part-time, differently-abled, LGBTQ+, gender expansive, parenting, foster care-involved, military-connected, or justice-impacted and who may also need to be the focus of equity-focused efforts.

Most people interviewed for this study conceived of SSTs as a strategy for improving equitable outcomes. Indeed, any scaled holistic support approach, including SSTs, can and should promote equity, not just overall student success...but only if you intentionally design it to do so. An equity-forward perspective means looking beyond aggregate success rates to find ways to use SSTs to help ensure that students' backgrounds do not predetermine their outcomes. This approach requires that institutions work to create conditions that support the success of student groups historically excluded from higher education and for whom higher education was not designed.

The colleges in our study were using an SST approach to:

- Address the fact that, at most community colleges, many more students need holistic, sustained support than smaller programs can serve

- Acknowledge that students for whom higher education was not designed should receive holistic support that honors their backgrounds and experiences

Despite their equity goals, our study participants indicated that their institutions lacked clear and explicit definitions of equity and equitable outcomes. Few interviewees felt that their college had a shared vision of what equity looks like that could be clearly articulated by individuals across the college.

As a result, participants worried that (a) SSTs would change institutional structures, but not the negative experiences of racially-minoritized and poverty-impacted students that affect their sense of belonging; (b) SSTs would fail to address specific needs of student groups most disadvantaged by our higher education system, and (c) SSTs had the potential to pull students away from culturally-responsive cohort programs.

One interviewee emphasized that any equity strategy, including SSTs, needs to be connected to broader work ensuring that minoritized students are consistently valued throughout the institution. Without such attention, colleges engage in "performative equity" and SSTs may then "perpetuate the same [societal] structures" that lead to inequity today.

Designing SSTs with Equity at the Center

Colleges need to make designing and implementing for equity the centerpiece of their SST design and implementation planning process. By this, we mean taking an "intentional universal design approach"[7] in which the strengths and needs of the students most disadvantaged within the college are identified at the outset and used as the starting point for a future state. The first step is to engage college stakeholders in difficult conversations about race, class, positional power, and the new community college student. These conversations help design teams define what equity means on their campus, who they are working to support, and what equitable practices and outcomes look like. During this step, college leaders also need to "put their names behind" an equity-forward process and nurture the difficult conversations required.

7 For additional information about Institutional Universal Design see, for example, Karp, M.M., Cormier, M., Whitley, S.E., Umbarger-Wells, S.M., & Wesaw, A. (2020). *First-generation students in community and technical colleges: A national exploration of institutional support practices.*; Kezar, A., Perez, R.J., Kitchen, J.A., & Hallet, R.E. (2021). Learning how to tailor programmatic offerings to support low-income, first-generation, and racially minoritized student success. *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success.*

Then, colleges need to put equity definitions at the center of their process. At Central NY Small CC, the SST design team was given a single guiding principle: Keep our students who are most structurally disadvantaged at the center of the design.

Colleges designing with equity at the center also integrated these approaches into their work.

Integrate the Student Perspective. This meant including students on the design team, examining student experience data, and building SST expectations and practices that address the challenges the students themselves say matter. At Southern CA Medium-Large CC8, this included developing a student advisory board; at Northern CA Large CC it meant including a student on each SST; and, at Northern CA Medium-Large CC, this meant using students as peer coaches.

Build Equity-Forward Professional Learning into SST Development. Being intentional about SSTs as an equity strategy means pushing all members of the team to interrogate their practices to understand how their engagement with students can elevate or hinder success. At Eastern PA Medium-Large CC this included an anti-racism training that interviewees hoped would help stakeholders look at systemic barriers, and at Northern CA Medium-Large CC this included leveraging a Title V grant to provide culturally relevant trainings.

Embed Team Members Whose Role it is to Focus on Equity. Central CA Medium CC had equity coaches and Eastern PA Medium-Large CC had an equity subcommittee connected to their SSTs to make sure someone was responsible for asking what the impact of SST design and related campus policies and practices could have on key groups of students. Stakeholders noted that thinking about equity needs to become a visible, vocal part of their day-to-day work.

Connect SSTs to Specific Student Populations. Rather than connect their SSTs to academic programs, Southern CA Medium-Large CC8 created SSTs for the student groups with the lowest success rates at their college, with the intent to scale teams to all groups of students over time. Northern CA Medium-Large CC connected one of their SSTs to their multi-cultural center.

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