



BOLD
THINKERS
DRIVING
REAL-WORLD
IMPACT

WHITE PAPER

How Can We Make Community College Investments More Equitable?

Allison Hyra, Ph.D.
Senior Associate
Social & Economic Policy
Abt Associates

April 2021

Introduction

Community colleges provide an important route for millions of Americans to self-sufficiency and a fulfilling career. Both the Department of Labor (DOL) and Department of Education (ED) use grants and formula funding to make investments in community colleges through initiatives such as Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training (DOL), Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants (DOL), and Perkins IV Title I Grants (ED). Community colleges use these funds to design and provide programs of study that prepare individuals for work in well-paying, in-demand jobs that meet local employers' needs. The programs also build career pathways that enable individuals "to enter and exit [the work force] at various levels and to advance over time to higher skills, recognized credentials, and better jobs with higher pay."¹ The Biden Administration has issued a series of executive orders directing the executive branch to assess ways to advance equity and provide all Americans with the opportunity to reach their full potential.² Community colleges are well-positioned to advance equity. They already serve diverse student bodies.³ And due to their missions, they are in strong positions to carry an equity focus and ensure Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), and women enroll in and complete training and become employed in higher paying jobs and industries.

This paper provides several recommendations for how community colleges can address racial and gender disparities in their training programs. Please note that while I use the phrase BIPOC and women, I recognize that people's identities intersect (intersectionality) and that BIPOC women experience the world as members of both groups. I also recognize that adherents of many

By ensuring more BIPOC and women enroll in and complete programs of study, community colleges can help them secure high-paying, stable careers.

religions, individuals with differing abilities, LGBTQIA individuals, and members of other marginalized groups also deserve economic and social equity.

Understand the Current Context and Select Target Programs of Study

Focus on developing and enhancing programs that will maximize the economic payoff for racially diverse and women participants.

Within most community colleges, there's wide variation in starting salaries for graduates of different programs of study. Economic equity requires: 1) increasing representation of women and people of color in occupations that command relatively higher salaries⁴ and 2) combating wage discrimination that pays men and white people more than similarly employed women and BIPOC.⁵ Typically graduates of programs such as associates in nursing, avionics, dental hygiene, electrical engineering technology, or radiology command much higher salaries than other programs such as cosmetology or home health assistance.

Assess the demographics of high-paying training programs' participants.

After identifying the highest-paying programs of study, see if they disproportionately serve white people and men. While community colleges overall serve

¹ <https://www.abtassociates.com/projects/career-pathways-what-we-know-so-far-and-options-for-closing-gaps-in-knowledge>

² <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/>

³ <http://perspectives.acct.org/stories/diversity-of-community-college-students-in-7-charts>

⁴ <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/01/why-are-women-still-choosing-the-lowest-paying-jobs/551414/>

⁵ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/03/24/482141/quick-facts-gender-wage-gap/>

a diverse student body, you may find that gender and racial diversity does not carry through to all of your programs, and specifically your programs that generate the largest post-program income opportunities. Calculate the racial/ethnic and gender breakdown of both program enrollees and program completers. How do those proportions compare with your overall school enrollee and completer demographics? What about your community? Programs that have disproportionately fewer people of color or women are strong candidates for an equity makeover/improvement.

Identify a set of programs of study to target with equity efforts. Determine a feasible size and scope of your investment, given your local climate, scale of disproportionalities, and budget. Based on that assessment, you can prioritize, if needed, the first set of programs you will target for equitable enrollment and completion. You can use a variety of criteria to select the first programs you want to target to improve equity. You may want to focus on programs with greatest employment opportunities or growth potential. You could also focus on programs where staff have an equity mindset and are excited to do equity work. Alternatively, you could focus on programs that have some BIPOC or women as students and/or staff, but a disproportionately low number. This critical mass may make the program attractive and thus easier to improve than one that has almost no members of your target populations.

Adapt Your Program and Services to Meet BIPOC and Women's Needs

Hire and retain members of your target population to lead your targeted program.

While your overall staff demographics may be diverse, it is likely that white men are overrepresented as staff of the programs you've flagged for disproportionality. Women and BIPOC should be part of your targeted programs of study at all levels, including as staff, instructors, leadership, management, and mentors.

It may take additional effort to hire people from a population underrepresented in a field to take a role in teaching that field, but that investment will be well worth it. Those individuals have lived experiences that many of your program staff will not, and your program and your target program participants will learn from their experiences. It will also be key to ensure BIPOC and female new program staff fully become part of the program through a welcoming and inclusive staff environment and culture.

Create a culture of inclusivity. Recruiting and serving women and BIPOC cannot be the responsibility only of program of study staff from those target populations. All individuals involved in your program of study, including white/male program participants and college leadership, need to commit to creating and maintaining an inclusive culture. This work is multifaceted and includes assessing how your curriculum, facilities, internships, and staff attitudes include/exclude/engage with your target population and should also include a review of college-level policies and practices. Examples include:

- having a female or gender-neutral restroom on the machine shop training floor
- ensuring textbooks in medical studies don't perpetuate dangerous myths like BIPOC people have higher pain tolerance than white people
- providing diversity and inclusion training, including anti-racist training, to program staff
- establishing a program-level code of conduct and holding people who break it accountable.

Organizations such as the [National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity](#) provide considerable advice and support to make training and education opportunities accessible and welcoming to all.

Acknowledge historical inequalities in the program of study's relevant industry. To combat inequities, we need to name and acknowledge

how the inequities came to be and were perpetuated. The U.S. has a long history of educational⁶ and employment⁷ discrimination, and those discriminatory practices are associated with the disproportionalities in your targeted program's occupations and industries. You should conduct research to understand the racist policies and practices in your program of study's industry. Common tactics include whites-only spaces of training, service, or employment (e.g., whites-only hospitals or restaurants), unions barring people of color from membership, and racial discrimination in hiring and wages. Staff and program participants should learn and know this information and why the program is committed to equity.

Provide supports needed by target populations to complete the program. Each program, target population, and context may require a unique set of supports to ensure target population graduation. You will need to collect information from current and prospective program participants and reflect back on historical and current inequities to determine your specific supports. These supports may address some of the reasons that women and BIPOC may not be enrolling in targeted programs of study. For example, well-paying programs may be longer than other programs, so individuals under significant financial stress may not be able to devote multiple semesters to study and forgo a paycheck. Common supports include childcare onsite and with timing aligned with courses; industry mentors from the same target population; financial support; paid on-the-job training opportunities; student affinity groups for peer support and sharing within a target population; tutoring; and translation support. Frameworks such as Targeted Universalism can help guide your selection.⁸

Build A Pipeline to your Targeted Program

Make recruitment materials and efforts inclusive and relevant to the target population.

People need to see themselves in your materials, such as website, flyers, radio ads, and internet ads to get the sense that they could be a part of your program. Ensure such additions or representations are authentic, that actual student images are presented, and that messaging is co-constructed with members of your target population.

Spend time determining whether you need to change/expand the way you advertise and conduct outreach.

Make sure you are forming connections with guidance counselors at high schools that serve a high proportion of your target population. Place print and radio ads in media that your target population is likely to use. Send staff who are members of your target population to attend career fairs and senior days at high schools with a large percentage of students who belong to your target population. Ensure all messaging clearly indicates your school's commitment to increasing diversity in specified target programs, rather than increasing school enrollment generally. Invite (and provide transportation to) target population members to tour your campus and spend a day learning about your targeted program of study. Make sure staff at any common referring organizations, such as local American Job Centers (AJC) or community-based organizations, know about your programs and commitment to equity.

Build a ramp to your target programs of study.

If you are trying to recruit groups underrepresented in a field, you may find potential applicants have little exposure/access to certain occupations and industries and the skills and knowledge successful program participants need. Rather than accepting individuals into a program of study they may not yet be prepared for, develop a bridge or 101 program that can help fill the gap between their current knowledge and the requisites for

⁶ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/unequal-opportunity-race-and-education/>

⁷ C.f., Katznelson, I. (2005). *When Affirmative Action Was White: Uncivil Rights*. New York: WW Norton.

⁸ <https://belonging.berkeley.edu/targeteduniversalism>

successful completion of the program of study. Bridge programs provide support in foundational concepts or relevant knowledge, such as math, or introduce potential program participants to skills incumbent workers may already have, like basic tool and die measurement techniques. For example, fewer than 7% of electricians nationally are Black. Black children may be less likely to have family members who are electricians or attend high schools that offer relevant courses or even discuss becoming an electrician as a career aspiration. A bridge program can help set Black applicants for electrician programs up to successfully complete studies for their chosen profession. Another important ramp to your targeted programs of study is ensuring potential participants meet any placement test requirements by offering test preparation courses.

Build a Ramp to Successful Job Searches and Employment

Provide relevant job search and employment supports. Each program and target population will also have a unique set of employment strategies. In addition to the common supports of resume building, interview practice, and job boards, you make want to determine if additional supports can address employment discrimination. Program graduates may need economic support to travel to and from interviews, apply for licensing exams, feel empowered to negotiate a fair salary, or pay for childcare. Because systemic racism and discrimination have led to a disproportionate involvement in the criminal justice system for BIPOC, some program graduates may need support clearing their records or a description of their program performance from a probation officer. Connect program participants with job search organizations designed to connect BIPOC to welcoming employers, such as the NAACP's [Job Finder](#).

Build an off-ramp to employers committed to equity. Participants training in a field in which they are underrepresented are likely to face a job

environment where they are also in the minority. Help program graduates find employment at companies and organizations with cultures welcoming and respectful of diversity and inclusion. Organizations run, led, or owned by women and people of color may be good starting points for strong, committed partners. In addition, your targeted programs would benefit from integrating these women and BIPOC-owned/led companies into the program as formal partners.⁹ Employer partners could recommend and assess curriculum changes, provide training and internship opportunities, and refer their incumbent workers for up-skills training at your college.

By ensuring equity amongst programs of study that prepare people for high-wage employment, community colleges can build a workforce truly representative of the diversity of America.

⁹ <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/OASP/legacy/files/Employer-Perspectives-Study-Report-Round-Final.pdf>

[Abt Associates](#) is a global consulting and research firm with a 55-year history of using data and bold thinking to improve the quality of people's lives. From combatting infectious disease and conducting rigorous program evaluations, to ensuring safe drinking water and promoting access to affordable housing—and more—we partner with clients and communities to tackle their most complex challenges. Our worldwide staff of 3,600 crosses geographies, methods, and disciplines to deliver tailored solutions grounded in evidence.



For more information, please contact:

Allison Hyra, Ph.D.

Senior Associate

Social & Economic Policy Division

Allison_Hyra@abtassoc.com

www.abtassociates.com

