



Strategically Messaging Equity as a Postsecondary & Workforce Imperative

Insights from Research with
Community Colleges &
Public Funders

September 2024

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With support from
THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION



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Acknowledgments

This research was funded by The Annie E. Casey Foundation, Inc., and we thank them for their support; however, the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author(s) alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

Thank you also to representatives from our participating colleges and public funders, without whom this report would not have been possible.

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Suggested Citation

Poole, J. (2024). *Strategically messaging equity as a postsecondary & workforce imperative: Insights from research with community colleges & public funders* (White Paper). Corporation for a Skilled Workforce.

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Inside This Report

Colleges and universities have advanced diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), including racial equity, as a postsecondary educational and workforce imperative for decades.

The federal government enshrined equal opportunity and affirmative action into employment law in the 1960s. Additional measures were introduced in the 1970s to enforce affirmative action and address ongoing racial and gender-based discrimination in the workplace (AAAED, n.d.). Since then, colleges and universities have pursued equity as a social imperative through policy, practice, and related messaging.

The pursuit of equity in American higher education is critical to creating a more just society. Colleges and universities are engines of upward mobility, shaping the economic outcomes of individuals and families for generations.

Yet, for many racially minoritized and low-income students, the benefits of college completion remain inconsistent or inaccessible. Postsecondary attainment data shows that 50% of white adults hold college degrees compared to 34% of Black adults and 28% of Hispanic adults (Lumina Foundation, 2023). These disparities persist at a time when research shows that postsecondary credential attainment is associated with higher earnings, protective effects against unemployment, and better health outcomes (Fain, 2019).

Colleges and universities also serve as anchor institutions, shaping equitable access to resources and opportunities in their communities. They influence the fair distribution of quality jobs and career pathways.

Through partnerships with employers and as major employers themselves, colleges have the power to promote fairer job-seeking and working conditions and improve outcomes for students and communities. These equity efforts



help employers foster inclusive environments while ensuring industries have the skilled talent required for sustainable growth. With demographics shifting across the U.S. and colleges grappling with enrollment challenges, advancing racial equity through the recruitment and retention of students from diverse backgrounds has also become an economic imperative and a crucial business strategy for colleges.

However, recent legislation, court rulings, and actions by elected officials have increasingly threatened efforts to advance racial equity in higher education. These challenges are particularly pronounced for open-access two- and four-year institutions, including community colleges, which now face risks tied to their DEI initiatives. The risks affect both internal efforts involving faculty, staff, and students, as well as external collaborations with partners.

In light of these challenges, there is a growing need for knowledge and discourse on how colleges and their partners can effectively leverage messaging to defend and promote equity as an imperative. With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) has conducted research exploring how colleges and their partners use messaging as a strategic tool to advance equity, especially racial equity, while navigating the current DEI climate in the U.S. This research aligns with CSW's values

on **racial equity and inclusion**, including our belief that reducing educational and labor market disparities for people of color is an economic and social imperative. The report also draws on CSW's expertise in working with community colleges and their industry partners to expand access to educational and economic opportunities, particularly for historically underrepresented and marginalized people and communities.

Overview of Findings

The findings of this research highlight how colleges use messaging as a lever to advance equity, particularly racial equity, through their partnerships with industry, employers, community organizations, federal and state funders ("public funders"), philanthropy ("private funders"), and within their campus communities. Colleges regularly frame equity in ways that hold promise for advancing equity as an imperative, even in the face of a challenging environment marked by anti-DEI legislation and political resistance in various states. By "framing," we refer to how colleges talk about, describe, articulate efforts, or otherwise communicate to advance equity, especially racial equity. There is also a role to play for public funders, using equity metrics and data to support colleges' equity efforts and related messaging and framing.



The Complex Climate Surrounding Equity Messaging

A complex climate surrounds colleges and their partners' ability to influence and strategically pursue and message equity, especially racial equity. This climate is comprised of numerous challenging and supportive factors, which shape community colleges' use of equity messaging and funders' efforts to support equity with grantees.

Colleges face several challenges in pursuing and messaging equity:

- **Anti-DEI Policies and Political Actions:** Restrictions on DEI efforts affect colleges' ability to pursue equity goals.
- **Competing Needs:** Economic hardships faced by students and communities complicate prioritizing equity.
- **Data Capacity Issues:** Inadequate data processes and privacy concerns hinder effective equity messaging.
- **Partnership Constraints:** Resource limitations among partners create challenges in implementing equity-focused practices.
- **Funder Challenges:** Capacity issues among funders and grantees affect the ability to meet data and evidence demands.

Several factors appear to contribute to a supportive environment for promoting racial equity:

- **Funder Grant & Allocation Strategies:** Public and private funders influence colleges to focus on equity by tying funding to equity metrics, requiring disaggregated data, and incorporating racial equity measures into funding models.

- **Equity-Minded Leadership:** Institutional leaders who prioritize equity and integrate it into strategic plans and community engagement play a crucial role.
- **Accessing & Using Data:** Effective data use is supported by accessible dashboards, professional development, and integration into decision-making.
- **Students & Community Composition:** Being a Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) or located in a diverse community can reinforce a college's commitment to equity, with local advocates holding institutions accountable.
- **Equity-Centered Policymaking:** Policymakers and accreditors with equity agendas support colleges in their equity pursuits.

Strategic Equity Messaging by Community Colleges

Across the country, colleges employ strategic messaging frames to communicate and articulate their efforts to promote equity, particularly racial equity. These frames are not necessarily used because they are backed by prior research. However, they correspond with decades of public opinion and issue framing studies (e.g., Luong et al., 2019; Kaiser, 2020), suggesting that the approaches colleges use may be effective.

Colleges regularly pursue and communicate equity in various ways, highlighting specific aspects of equity or aligning with the values and ideologies of their partners. In doing so, colleges frame equity as an imperative, potentially increasing the likelihood of gaining partners' support.

Strategic Equity Messaging Frames

Our research identifies five successful messaging frames.

FRAME 1: Managing Anti-DEI Legislation & Politics as Risks

When it is strategic, colleges frame anti-DEI legislation and politics – not DEI itself – as risks to be managed.

Examples: Framing anti-DEI legislation as a risk to be managed; Developing toolkits and mechanisms to sustain DEI programs; Promoting DEI with the help of legal counsel and evidence of negative impacts of anti-DEI efforts.

FRAME 2: Prioritizing Equitable Outcomes for Students of Color

When it is strategic, colleges focus on equal workforce and education outcomes for historically marginalized racial groups through messaging.

Examples: Emphasizing efforts to rectify state and local problems; Using mechanistic messaging about structural racism; Making the case for race-conscious improvements; Backing messaging up with evidence-based policies and practices.

FRAME 3: Increasing Opportunity for Community College Students

When it is strategic, colleges emphasize efforts to increase access and opportunity for traditionally underserved groups

Examples: Describing efforts to create a sense of belonging; Informing students of supports; Implementing and messaging pathways approaches for upward mobility; Increasing access for students holding sub-baccalaureate credentials.

FRAME 4: Promoting Equity as a Lever for Workforce Efficiency

When it is strategic, colleges use equity messaging to frame racial equity and diversity as means of improving workforce efficiency.

Examples: Acknowledging employers' "filling vacancies" goals; Highlighting inefficiencies in hiring and retention; Training HR leaders to promote an equitable climate; Establishing and sustaining employer engagement.

FRAME 5: Advancing Place-Based Fairness for Communities

When it is strategic, colleges emphasize the need to improve conditions for their local communities, who face education, training, and employment disparities.

Examples: Working in coalitions to achieve impact (especially as an anchor institution); Building coalitions with local community.

Public Funders' Critical Role

Public funders play a pivotal role in advancing equity through a series of practices which influence and support how colleges frame equity messaging, particularly using equity data. Through a series of practices, public funders help ensure that racial equity remains a key objective in colleges' and other grantees' educational and workforce initiatives.

Public funders can employ a number of strategies to advance equity:

- **Advancing Equity Through Funding Rules & Goals:** Public funders set the agenda for racial equity by translating executive priorities and legislation into funding rules and goals. At the federal and state level, public funders write funding rules, direct funding to specific organizations, and direct funding towards building capacity of colleges and other grantees.
- **Tying Equity Information & Data to Funding:** Public funders advance equity by requiring grantees to tie equity information and data to their funding. Public funders regularly:
 - Require qualitative descriptions of grantees' equity goals and plans.
 - Require grantees to specify customized equity outcomes and gaps that they seek to improve with funding.
 - Require grantees to submit equity data to a performance management system for tracking.
 - Ask grantees to consider and use labor market data.
 - Ask grantees to consider and use an evidence base.
 - Use data for research and impact evaluations.



Introduction

Community colleges and their partners have faced scrutiny in their efforts to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), particularly in advancing racial equity as a critical educational and workforce imperative (herein referred to as an “imperative”). This scrutiny has intensified in recent years. While community colleges have always navigated some level of risk in these efforts, the current climate – marked by heightened political polarization and court rulings such as [the Supreme Court’s decision on affirmative action](#) – has significantly escalated the challenges (NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, n.d.).

Given these challenges, there is a need for more knowledge and discourse on how messaging can be used to defend and otherwise advance equity, especially racial equity, on behalf of students, families, and communities. [Growing momentum surrounding anti-DEI legislation across states](#) further intensifies this need (Bryant & Appleby, 2024), prompting our team at Corporation for a Skilled Workforce (CSW) to conduct research and reporting which equips colleges and their partners with actionable information.

With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, CSW has conducted research to explore how community colleges and their funders, including federal and state funders (“public funders”), message and frame equity to help counter these challenges and advance equity on behalf of students, families, and communities. From May 2023 to May 2024, CSW staff engaged senior leaders, faculty and administrators at community colleges and among public funding agencies in conversations to seek answers to the following questions:

- How does the current climate surrounding DEI in the U.S. influence colleges’ use of strategic messaging and funders’ efforts to promote equity as an education and workforce imperative?
- How do colleges advance equity as an imperative when communicating with their partners, including public funders, community organizations, industry and employers, and campus community members? At the level of practice, what approaches and strategies appear promising to gain buy-in and support for equity efforts?
- How do public funders contribute to colleges’ messaging to advance equity as a workforce imperative: incentivizing and otherwise supporting colleges, as grantees, by tying equity goals and data to their funding?

This report outlines the strategic framing used by community colleges to advance equity in collaboration with their partners. By “framing,” we refer to how colleges talk about, describe, articulate efforts, or otherwise communicate their efforts to advance equity, especially racial equity, as an imperative. In this report, we also highlight the critical role that funders play in requiring, supporting, and otherwise encouraging community colleges, as grantees, to prioritize equity as a workforce and community college objective.

Participating Colleges & Public Funders

This research was conducted with representatives from eleven community colleges and five public funders. We held 90-minute virtual interviews with participants covering a range of topics tied to the use of

messaging and data to advance equity, and in particular, racial equity.

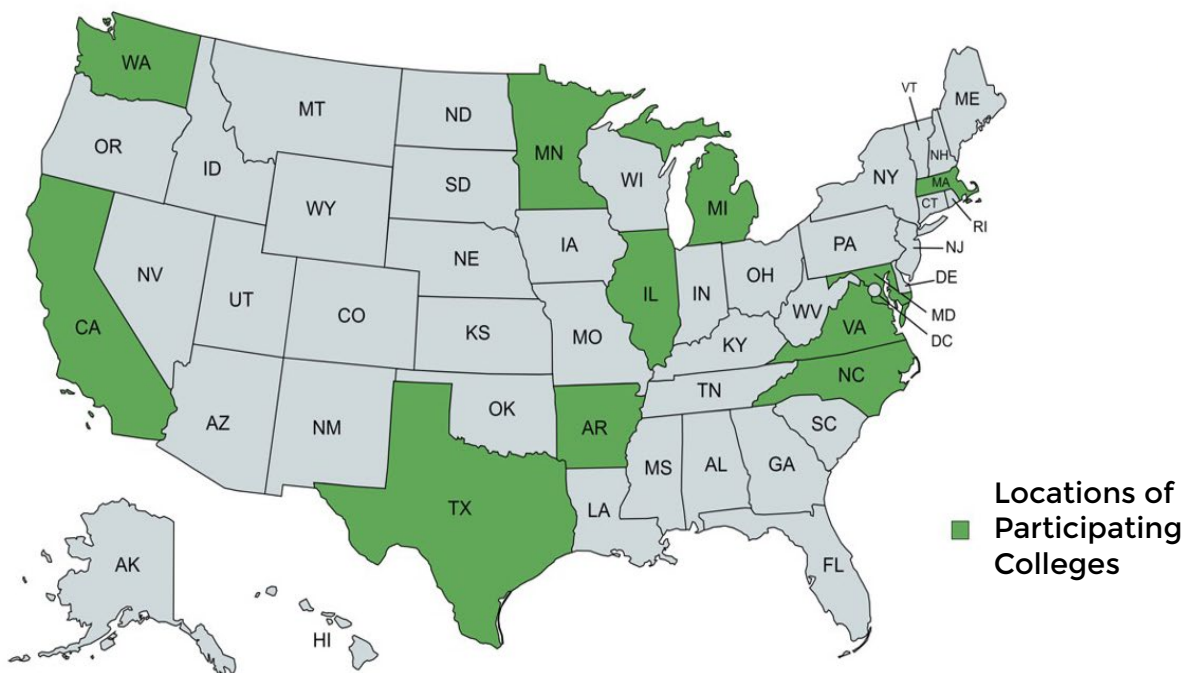
Community colleges play a key role in upholding and **improving worker and community outcomes**, the **ability of companies and industries to recruit and retain** their labor force (Love & Palmer 2024), and **the vitality of the American economy** and represent key messengers for equity, including racial equity (Lumina Foundation, 2014). For this reason, we conducted interviews with community college representatives, sampling for regional diversity throughout the U.S. as indicated in the map below. The community colleges selected to participate in interviews represent an array of states that have previously passed and are considering anti-DEI legislation, as well as states without anti-DEI legislation.

As a subset of this work, we also explored how public funders strategically tie equity data to their funding, providing resources that promote equity advancements, especially racial equity. CSW also conducted interviews with five public funders: two federal agencies, one state agency,

one statewide labor/workforce intermediary, and one city workforce board.

Much has been written about **the role of philanthropy in advancing racial equity in the U.S.** (e.g., Julien, Nowski, & Youssefi, 2023). Empirical research exists, which offers insight into the impact of public funders **directing their investments and goals** to advance racial equity in communities and **across industries** (Freemark et al., 2023; Kalra et al., 2022). From prior research, we know that funders have an impact on grantees' equity pursuits by **tying metrics to their organizational and funding goals** (Yangden, 2024). In our research, we explored how funders, particularly public funders at the local, state, and federal levels, can influence community colleges' pursuit and messaging of equity by tying equity metrics and other data to their funding.

Due to possible risks associated with their promotion of DEI and racial equity more specifically, participating colleges and funders have not been named in our reporting.



Equity Messaging's Complex Climate

How does the current climate surrounding DEI in the U.S. influence colleges' use of strategic messaging and funders' efforts to promote equity as an education and workforce imperative?

Community colleges and their partners, including public funders, have varying degrees of influence in advancing equity through messaging. This finding contrasts with our initial assumptions, which presumed that community colleges consistently act as agents with the power to leverage messaging to promote equity when collaborating with partners.

Multiple factors challenge the ability of colleges and their partners to use messaging to advance equity, particularly anti-DEI policies and politics, including the passage of anti-DEI legislation and court rulings. However, several supportive factors also exist. Funders' priorities and the allocation of resources remain a key support for colleges, significantly shaping their capacity to use messaging to advance equity, particularly racial equity, as a critical priority.

Anti-DEI Policy & Politics

Anti-DEI leaders, legislation, legal decisions, and climates ensuing from all three, represent a serious barrier to colleges' racial equity efforts. This includes things like:

- Passing state laws, which prohibit community college staff, faculty, and student employees from promoting equity and eliminate equity-centered roles, equity-related policies, and any inclusion of equity language in contracts;
- Sending surveys to colleges, asking them to name their DEI policies and practices, including the people who are employed in DEI positions and offices; pursuing and obtaining seats on **college and university boards**, to advance a commitment to anti-DEI goals;
- Silencing talk of equitable outcomes Black, Latina/o/x, Indigenous students and other students of color, tied to racial resentment and belief in the **myth of reverse discrimination**;
- Other actions described throughout national news media, but not explored in our research – **for example, attorneys general across 13 states threatening actions against colleges' employers** (Anderson & Gecker, 2023; Newkirk, 2017; Wiessner, 2023).



“The very real issue is that we are currently not serving populations and completing students like we need to be. So, we can't pat ourselves on the back... We've got to get there, but you know, it's challenging.”

Such challenges are felt by colleges across states, even in those with legislatures favorable to DEI. These colleges face risks and feel the responsibility to “double down” on improving student outcomes for Black, Latino/a/x, Indigenous students, and other groups traditionally excluded from educational and workforce success, in ways that some states may no longer be able to.

Funder Grant & Allocation Strategies

Public and private funders play an important role in keeping colleges committed to pursuing equity through various funding opportunities, including grants and allocation strategies that prioritize equity. In our research, we heard multiple examples of how funders tie equity metrics and other data to their funding for community colleges as grantees. Colleges and public funders shared that funders tie equity metrics and other data to this funding by:

- Requiring or otherwise requesting colleges receiving year-over-year education and workforce funding to submit disaggregated data on race and ethnicity, both for tracking purposes but also for the purposes of conducting impact evaluations.
- Incorporating the pursuit of equitable outcomes for students of color, including the use of evidence-based strategies known to improve such outcomes, as criteria for deciding which colleges’ proposals to fund.
- Requiring grantees to choose, using data, a specific population experiencing inequitable education or workforce outcomes and identify a metric that the grantee can use to guide their goals and

track efforts to improve outcomes for this group.

- Informing grantees that should they be awarded funding, they will be required to submit disaggregated data on outcomes-related metrics, like the “outcomes of skills training programs and upskilling efforts.”
- For states where the legislatures have required the use of performance-based funding models for higher education, **incorporating racial equity measures**, and particularly those focused on completion of degrees and credentials by Black, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous students and other students of color, into the model (HCM Strategists, 2019).

In response to such actions by funders, colleges use data and metrics to message and pursue equitable outcomes for Black, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous students and other students of color. We explore the critical role of public funders in Section 3 of this report.

Other Challenging Factors

The following factors help shape the current climate surrounding colleges and their partners efforts to advance DEI, because they challenge colleges’ ability to leverage equity messaging to promote racial equity with partners.

“Equity for Whom” - Competing Needs Faced by Students & Communities:

Students, families, and communities often confront multiple, systemic forms of inequity simultaneously – for example, being excluded from economic and educational success due to both their race and experiences of poverty. This challenge complicates colleges’ equity efforts. Colleges must decide whose needs to prioritize



as they pursue and communicate their equity initiatives, including but not limited to racial equity.

Lack of Knowledge About “What Works” & At Scale: Colleges lack access to scalable, culturally responsive, evidence-based equity practices, including those that work for pursuing and messaging equity as an education and workforce imperative. This challenges the ability of colleges to meet the needs of public and private funders, who want grantees to implement scalable, evidence-based policies and practices.

Data Capacity: Funders, colleges, and other grantees face inadequate data processes and privacy issues, which hinder effective equity messaging and the ability of funders to incentivize or otherwise support this messaging. For example, funders and grantees lack data dashboards, data-related professional development, and systems needed to capture data longitudinally – including information about job placements and career trajectories –

and across internal and external organizational boundaries to demonstrate impact.

Partner Constraints: Colleges work with partners who face a lack of capacity in terms of people, finances, and other resources, which can make equity-related engagement a challenge. These constraints, which include employee turnover, a lack of capacity among non-profit partners (K-12 schools and community-based organizations, etc.), exist across partners.

Funding-Related Challenges: Community colleges, funders, and other grantees face challenges when it comes to funding. Colleges and other grantees lack the capacity and resources needed to pursue and fulfill the demands of funding opportunities, especially when it comes to funders’ expectations for data and the use of evidence. Meanwhile, funders lack capacity and resources; for example, the time needed to partner with grantees to build their capacity to use “granular data,” or the “political will” among grantees to use data to demonstrate impact.



Other Supportive Factors

The following factors help shape the current climate surrounding colleges and their partners' efforts to advance DEI, because they support colleges' ability to leverage equity messaging to promote racial equity with partners.

Equity-Minded Leadership: Colleges' equity pursuits are helped by institutional leaders who make equity a leadership priority and are willing to use their leverage to advance it internally and externally – for example, incorporating equity goals and metrics into strategic plans, or spending time in the community improving relationships with advocacy groups.

Accessing & Using Data: Colleges benefit from leaders, faculty, and staff having access to data dashboards and related policies and practices, including professional development. This access helps colleges incorporate equity-related data into decision-making processes at all levels.

Students & Community Composition:

For some colleges, being a Minority-Serving Institution (MSI) and/or being located in a diverse community aids their ability to prioritize racial equity, as this equity is integral to their goals and operations based on the students and families they serve. Surrounding these colleges are also strong networks of non-profit organizations and individual advocates, who hold colleges "feet to the fire" to make sure the needs of traditionally underserved student populations are prioritized.

Equity-Centered Policymaking: Those who hold and represent public offices – including policymakers with equity agendas and goals and state agencies funding equity work – and accreditors who support equity play a key role in supporting colleges' efforts to pursue and message equity.

Strategic Equity Messaging by Community Colleges

How do colleges advance equity as an imperative when communicating with their partners? At the level of practice, what approaches and strategies appear promising to gain buy-in and support for equity efforts?

Across the country, colleges use strategic messaging frames to communicate and articulate their efforts to promote equity, particularly racial equity. While these frames are not necessarily chosen because they are backed by prior research, they correspond with decades of public opinion and issue framing studies (e.g., Luong et al., 2019; Kaiser, 2020), suggesting their potential effectiveness. Research from the FrameWorks Institute and other empirical studies (e.g., NASEM, 2016; Luong et al., 2019; Richardson, 2005; Nelson & Garst, 2005) underscores the critical role of message framing in shaping public support for racial equity in education and the workplace. This body of research suggests that message framing – when used by college leaders,

faculty, staff, and their partners – can be more persuasive when it emphasizes the need for and beneficiaries of equity, aligning with the values and ideologies of partners and other audiences.

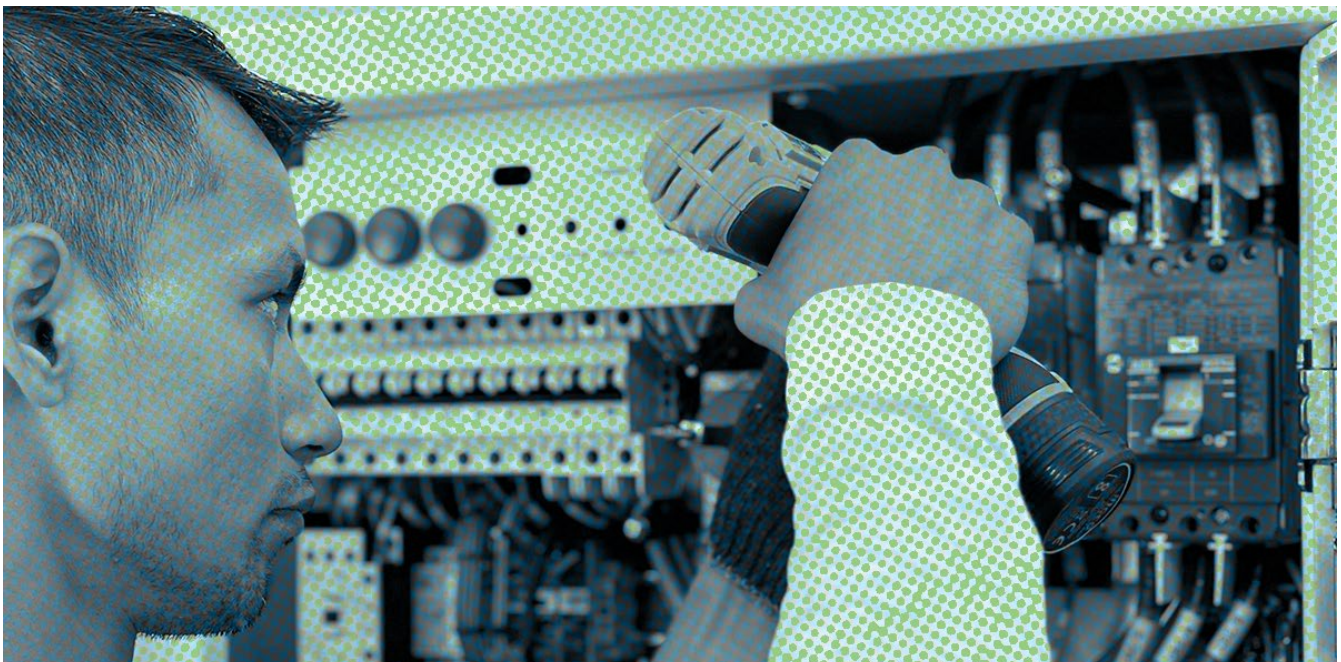
Colleges face challenges related to anti-DEI legislation and politics, alongside historical challenges tied to improving outcomes for individuals and families traditionally excluded from educational and workforce success. Despite these challenges, our research suggests multiple ways that community colleges frame and message equity, which hold promise for generating buy-in for equity and improvements. In the sections below, we present our findings on how colleges strategically frame equity as an imperative when communicating with partners.



When colleges strategically pursue and message equity, it involves:

1. Describing anti-DEI legislation and other political actions – not equity itself, nor the initiatives that benefit those historically left out of workforce/educational success – as the risks to be managed.
2. Prioritizing equitable outcomes for students of color, tying student outcomes to the pursuit of shared values.
3. Centering access, opportunity, inclusion, and belonging for students, in ways that are informed by data on students' needs.
4. Tying equity to the notion of workforce efficiency, recognizing that workforce efficiency terms and language is often a good match for the goals of employers.
5. Pursuing equity as place-based fairness for communities, improving conditions for individuals living in communities and neighborhoods who, due to circumstances beyond individuals' control, face education, training, and employment disparities.

Further research can provide additional insight into which messages and framing are most effective in different geographic and institutional contexts. At the same time, our findings suggest that colleges across the country – varying in location, size, and student composition – regularly engage in equity messaging by aligning with the values and ideologies of their campus community members and partners. By framing equity as a shared imperative, these institutions may increase the likelihood of gaining support from key stakeholders.





Across the country, and especially in states that have passed, proposed, or considered anti-DEI legislation, community colleges engage in equity messaging that emphasizes racial equity as a risk to be navigated. According to our research, this framing may be useful to colleges looking to internally and directly address the challenges posed by anti-DEI legislation and political pressures, which disrupt their efforts to continue to serve the diverse needs of their students and communities.

What drives this frame for equity?

This frame for equity is driven by a response to external forces—primarily state and local actors like legislators and governors—who actively pursue anti-DEI goals. These lawmakers pass legislation that prohibits college employees from promoting equity, while eliminating DEI-related roles, policies, and language in contracts. They also compel colleges to disclose their DEI practices through surveys and identify DEI staff. **Anti-DEI advocates are further solidifying their influence by winning seats on college boards**, undermining efforts to prioritize equitable outcomes for students (Saul, 2023). In addition, they partner with college employees and others to file lawsuits aimed at halting DEI efforts, **including efforts within community colleges** (Arrojas, 2023).

Beyond their anti-DEI goals, these actors wield significant power, shaping how community colleges approach racial equity as a risk to be avoided. College leaders, faculty, and staff respond by adopting messaging that carefully navigates racial equity as a risk: “saying the same things [about racial equity] without saying the same words,” which have become “politicized,” and “being very cautious about using particular words” to “navigate landmines.” For instance, at one rural college, a staff member consciously avoids emphasizing equity, especially racial equity, in outreach efforts, aware that the county’s elected leaders are openly anti-DEI. This risk-avoidant approach is reflective of how colleges’ equity messaging is being shaped by external opposition.

What does it look like to use this frame strategically?

When strategic, colleges frame anti-DEI legislation and rulings – not racial equity itself – as risks to be managed. Our research revealed that numerous community colleges adopt a more strategic approach to equity messaging by first developing a clear understanding of the risks posed by anti-DEI legislation and other political actions, and then engaging in and empowering others to engage in messaging that aligns with the specific type and level of risk. Through this approach, community college leaders, faculty, and staff gain greater leverage to advocate

for racial equity in their messaging, effectively “calibrating the level of ‘problemness’ with the availability of solutions and focusing on the possibility of improvements” (NASSEM, 2016, para 10).

➤ **Helping Others Understand Risk**

Colleges help their staff and faculty understand anti-DEI legislation and politics as risks to be navigated. At one community college, a senior leader addressed this challenge by helping empower others to understand and navigate this risk. They developed a toolkit and hosted information sessions to help faculty and staff “understand what the legislation says, exactly, and not make assumptions based off of it.” Rather than opposing the legislation, the toolkit helps faculty and staff understand the precise nature of the state legislation, including what it does and does not include, and incorporate it into their daily work. Key to this effort was the support of the general counsel’s office, who helped this senior leader separate perceived risk – where faculty and staff may make assumptions about the nature of their state’s anti-DEI laws in comparison to other states’ laws (for example, those in Florida and Texas) – from actual risk, which is directly tied to the language of the policy.

➤ **Finding New Mechanisms to Keep Programs Going**

Instead of closing DEI administrative offices and roles and terminating racial equity programs, colleges are finding new mechanisms to keep these positions and programs going. One community college anticipated the governor’s elimination of all DEI roles and offices – in fact, the elimination of all college policy related to DEI – by renaming their director of DEI position to reflect a broader focus on community engagement. This approach is not unique; **institutions nationwide have renamed their administrative DEI offices and roles** to reflect their broader responsibilities to serving students, using terms like “engagement,” “student success,” “institutional effectiveness,” “access,” “opportunity,” and “belonging.” In some states, colleges are also reassigning DEI staff to pre-existing offices focused on student success, recognizing that the work continues (Alonso, 2024).



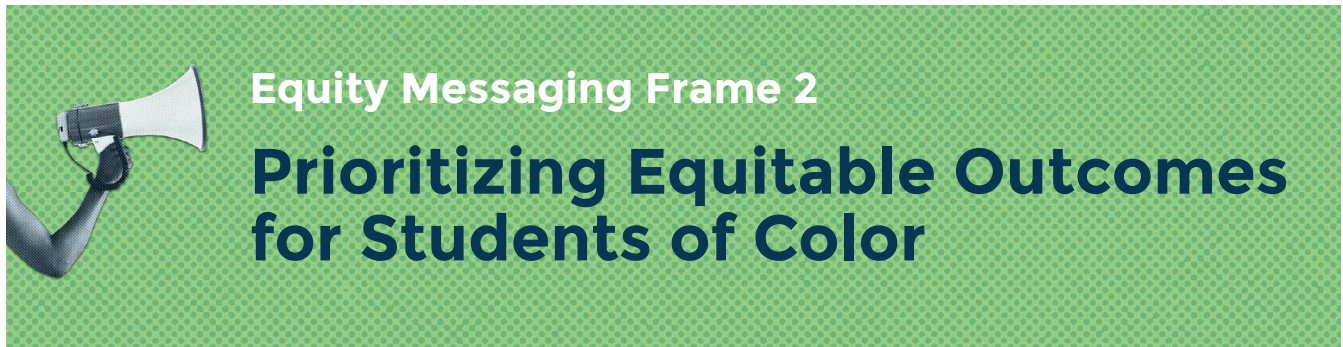
➤ **Sharing Evidence of the Impact of Anti-DEI Efforts**

Colleges use messaging to share empirical evidence of the negative impact that eliminating DEI programs has on students, who pay to attend and have a legal right to equal education. One college, for instance, recently revived an effective program that was conducted in partnership with a national non-profit and numerous faculty of color to improve outcomes for Black and Latino/a/x students. The college's board of directors had previously halted the program in response to the governor's anti-DEI agenda, despite its demonstrated success in retaining Black male students through cohort activities, leadership programming, and mentorship. The college decided to restart the program after data revealed that its elimination led to a decline in the number of Black men applying for and completing credentials.

➤ **Stepping Up Inclusion**

Colleges also use messaging to promote inclusion for students in response to the risks posed by anti-DEI legislative and political actions and the hostile campus climate these actions can create. This includes leaders using their platforms to advocate for equity at its intersections (for example, equity for students at the intersections of gender and race). For example, at one community college in **a state that passed an anti-LGBTQ bill allowing educators to deny the rights of transgender students** (Wolf, 2024), a provost used their convocation address to acknowledge the recent legislation and urge the campus community to treat transgender students with respect and dignity. The leader emphasized that, while the law prevents administrators from requiring faculty to use correct pronouns or stop harassment based on gender, it does not prevent them from speaking out for compassion and dignity for all students, including transgender students.





Community colleges also engage in equity messaging to describe their pursuit of equal workforce and education outcomes for students from historically marginalized racial groups, including Black, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous students and other students of color. According to our research, this framing may be useful to colleges seeking to address inequities and build momentum and support for solutions internally and externally with those who value DEI.

What drives this frame for equity?

In today's climate, it can be easy to forget that it is **federal civil rights law**, which indicates that in American higher education, students cannot "be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subject to any discrimination" based on race (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). Colleges, therefore, message equitable outcomes for students of color not just out of service to their missions and students, but also because they are required to provide an equal education to all students under federal law.

One significant way colleges pursue and prioritize equitable outcomes for students of color is by using data to highlight disparities. Colleges regularly use data to focus partners' attention on the persistence of inequitable outcomes, often framing these discussions through talk of equity gaps. This data consistently shows that Black, Latino/a/x, Indigenous, and other students of color are being excluded from the benefits of postsecondary education and workforce training colleges provide.

Colleges' efforts to highlight and address disparities are supported by robust data infrastructure at the college level. Institutions across the country have implemented innovative dashboards



"We're currently working on a dashboard with our campuses and it's all about the data... making sure that we can look at things quickly and then use that data to communicate. I mean, we look at our North Campus, and we see that, for years, Black men students, less [are completing degrees] every year. So, we have to be comfortable saying, 'For Black men, we have to take some action.'"

that enable leaders, staff, and faculty to understand equity gaps through data on retention, persistence, enrollment, and completion, broken down by demographics, geolocation, and semester. These dashboards enable colleges to “lead with data” in their equity messaging and demonstrate progress in narrowing equity gaps. Consequently, colleges can advance equity as an imperative by highlighting their pursuit of equitable outcomes, “using outcomes or numbers to show that we’ve been narrowing equity gaps... and communicating that to various audiences.”

Additionally, colleges’ strategic plans play a crucial role in driving efforts to ‘lead with data’ in their equity messaging. These plans often include racial equity goals tied to key performance indicators (KPIs), as well as leading and lagging indicators of student success.

What does it look like to use this frame strategically?

When strategic, community colleges go beyond the numbers, messaging equitable outcomes for students of color in ways that incorporate data and leverage shared values. One way colleges achieve this is by avoiding what The FrameWorks Institute has characterized as the use of “naked numbers” – numbers presented with little explanation or context – which can be unproductive when used in equity messaging (NASEM, 2016, p. 42). Instead, when colleges strategically message the pursuit of equitable outcomes for students of color, they “start with meaning, then numbers, to bring [audiences] along” (p. 42).



Rectifying State & Local Problems

Colleges prioritize the need for equitable outcomes for students of color while pursuing remedial action, which is “necessary to redress racial or ethnic inequality and discrimination,” structural racism, and a racial wealth gap at the state level (Richardson, 2005, p. 508). At one college, recent internal conversations about how the community college is serving students “start with student success” and “the fact that we’re a state institution,” before highlighting disparities at the state level. Although the state boasts one of the top education systems in the country, it simultaneously ranks in the “bottom five achievement gap as it pertains to students of color.”

At another college, a leader consistently raises awareness of inequities alongside the efforts the college is making to address them. The college recently received a leadership grant funded by the state, and during the application process, the leader highlighted that “most minority workers in the state are still in those low-wage occupations.”

Engaging in Mechanistic Messaging About Structural Racism

Colleges strategically engage in messaging by describing inequitable outcomes for students of color through “mechanistic explanations,” which outline how these outcomes stem from structural racism (NASEM, 2016, p. 42). Multiple colleges are engaged in deep equity work that resonates with the values of partners, particularly those open to conversations about racial equity, through initiatives such as training programs for employer partners’ HR teams.

One college, for example, has implemented multiple trainings for their local county administrator in the years following a high-profile local police shooting and amidst an influx of immigrants from South America and Africa. These trainings aim to improve local enforcement’s interactions with specialized populations and communities in the area and to address unconscious bias in hiring practices. The sessions showcase demographic and other data visualizations and begin with foundational knowledge needed to understand structural racism, including the “foundations of what race is and what it is not through pictures.”

Making the Case for Race-Conscious Improvements

Colleges often include key performance indicators (KPIs) in institutional and community college system strategic plans in their efforts to pursue and message the need for race-conscious policies, programs, support, and resources, which address the specific needs of students of color. For example, one college in a predominantly Black community used its strategic planning process to develop a unique data system that disaggregates data to serve both local community and system goals. A representative from this college connected their ability to do so to their system’s strategic plan, which states, “The goal is to achieve equity and access learning outcomes and success for students from every race, ethnicity, gender and socioeconomic group.”

Strategic plans and data dashboards have also enabled multiple colleges to address equity gaps affecting Latino/a/x students. At one college, a senior leader used the strategic plan

and dashboard data to discuss solutions for Latino/a/x students, the college's largest student group, who were self-selecting into low-wage occupational pathways. By analyzing dashboard reports, the leader explored race-conscious solutions, asking questions like, "Is it a matter of recruitment? Marketing? Do students need more help for high-wage career paths? More success coaches or career coaching to understand the world of work?"

Another college used data to address an equity gap facing Latino/a/x students who were dropping out of agricultural programs. The college identified significant issues with faculty communication with these students. Because of the data, administrators implemented practical measures, such as improved faculty communication practices and language translation services. These actions led to increased student re-enrollment and program completion rates.

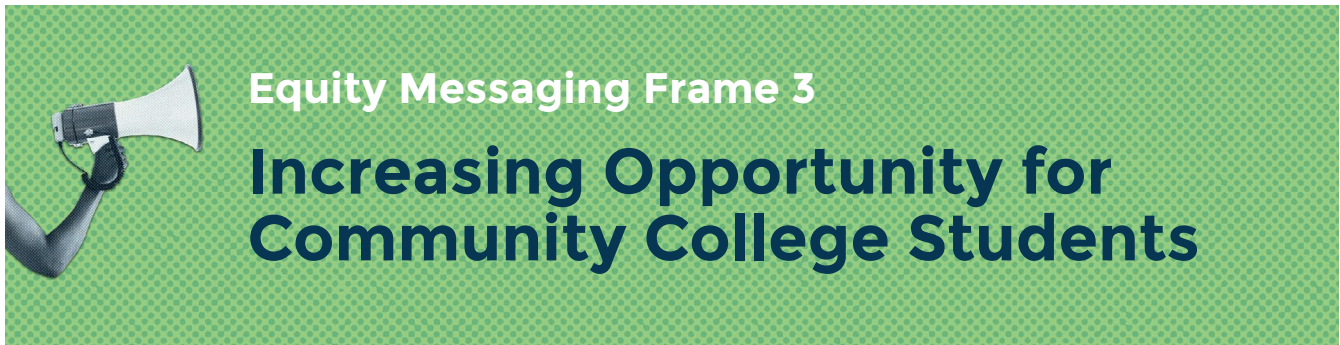
Supporting Messaging with Evidence-Based Policies & Practices **Improving Equitable Outcomes**

Funders often ask colleges to incorporate evidence-based practices into their proposals and initiatives. In response, many colleges strategically pursue and message equitable outcomes for students of color through evidence-based solutions, which aim to improve students' outcomes.

One college, for example, used philanthropic funding to join a learning community with local K-12 schools, focusing on implementing evidence-based practices to increase FAFSA applications and college enrollment among students of color. Another college engaged their dual enrollment program leaders to produce materials in Spanish to recruit more Latino/a/x students, recognizing that dual enrollment programs lead to "statistically higher rates of achievement for BIPOC students."



"Our funders are asking for more evidence-based strategies... What are things that have been researched to move the needle, with regard to increasing African American & Hispanic [students'] retention and completion?... They want your metrics to be based on evidence. You can't just be, 'Well, we want to increase retention at the institution by X percent.'"



Community colleges use equity messaging to highlight their efforts to expand opportunities for their diverse student body, which includes people from traditionally underserved groups such as Black, Latino/a/x, and Indigenous communities, as well as individuals from low-income backgrounds, rural areas, and older adults. According to our research, this framing may be useful to colleges internally, while addressing the various barriers facing community college students. This framing may also be useful to colleges engaged in external efforts, particularly with employer partners, to expand opportunities for students obtaining two-year degrees and other non-degree credentials.

What drives this frame for equity?

Community colleges emphasize their broader efforts to increase opportunity in their equity messaging because of who they serve. Our research aligns with **prior statistics**, which show that a significant portion of the community college population in the U.S. consists of groups traditionally excluded from education and workforce success (Community College Research Center, 2021). Multiple participants described their colleges as:

- MSIs or “minority-majority institutions,” including Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) and Predominantly Black Institutes (PBIs);
- Rural- and urban-serving institutions, including colleges where the entire student population comes from K-12 districts where 100% of students are eligible to receive free and reduced lunch;
- Located in areas facing a demographic cliff, with a need to improve access for non-traditional adult students, including “single mothers,” individuals involved in the criminal-legal system, and others;
- Serving large numbers of immigrant and refugee communities, whose needs can differ significantly from groups of other racially minoritized Americans.

Colleges often frame their equity messaging around efforts to increase equal opportunity for individuals. This approach is influenced by the complexity of equitably serving multiple underserved groups simultaneously and the need for pragmatic solutions.

Community colleges may also promote equity as a broader pursuit of increased access and opportunity for other reasons. For instance, they may default to framing racial equity as a pursuit

of access for students traditionally excluded from workforce success. In the context of anti-DEI legislation, the complexities and uncertainties of partners' racial equity goals, and other challenges, it can feel more "comfortable" for colleges to approach equity messaging in this way.

What does it look like to use this frame strategically?

When it is most strategic, community colleges frame equity as the pursuit of increased access and opportunity to current and prospective students. Prior research (e.g., Funk, 2000) and our interviews alike indicate that colleges strategically use equity messaging to inform students, communities, and families about their access to opportunities and encourage them to take advantage of these opportunities.

Promoting Access in Recruitment

Colleges use messaging to promote access to postsecondary education and training with prospective students and the surrounding community. One approach involves increasingly inclusive outreach and recruitment efforts. For example, multiple college representatives shared that they work with their marketing and communications teams to translate their recruitment materials into various languages spoken within their local communities, particularly Spanish. One college participates in a regional coalition with other community colleges, which includes a marketing subcommittee dedicated to "connect[ing] with nontraditional student groups to get them into community college."

Colleges also promote diverse representation via their recruitment messaging. They frequently and intentionally feature diverse students, faculty, and other members of the campus community on banners, billboards, and radio ads. One college deliberately hires diverse career navigators and coaches to visit and conduct programs in local high schools, ensuring that their staff reflects the diversity of their students. Another college hosts a professionals of color career conference for middle- and high-school students, aiming to show students that "the people who have the jobs that you want... look like [you,] the students who are participating in the program."

Championing Opportunity for Current Students

Colleges regularly use messaging to shape students' perceptions of college as a place of access and opportunity for their success. Marketing places a crucial role in helping colleges improve and message equal access and opportunity for their students. Across the nation, marketing and communications teams assist administrators in using qualitative and quantitative data to share diverse stories of student success through visual media and narratives crafted for leaders.

Colleges also use demographic data to create visual media aimed at recruiting and retaining individuals underrepresented in certain fields and those traditionally excluded from postsecondary education, such as students involved in the criminal-legal system and students with intellectual disabilities. For example, one college, with assistance from its marketing team,

developed “personas based on the data from our students.” These personas help the college better understand the issues current and prospective students face and market the right opportunities to them

Informing Students of Critical Supports

Colleges actively engage current and prospective students with messaging that promotes access to opportunities and resources, especially wraparound supports. For example, community colleges use messaging to inform students about available services such as emergency funds, food banks, licensed social workers, and student success advisors. One college leader emphasizes a “high touch” approach to informing students, advising staff to go beyond social media to ensure students are fully aware of these resources. This college also prioritizes making community organizations and high schools aware of available support, reinforcing the message that students are more than just numbers.

Another college uses equity messaging to justify funding for wraparound support. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of online mental health services became unsustainable. Recognizing the lack of mental healthcare access, the college now seeks grants to establish a clinic as part of their healthcare workforce center, offering both training and health services. The college also maintains food pantries on all campuses, leveraging data on pantry usage to secure funding and better understand students’ needs.

Implementing & Messaging Pathways Approaches for Upward Mobility

Colleges use messaging to boost student participation in non-credit to credit pathways, thereby enhancing access to “high-wage, high-demand” employment opportunities. Many community college students, often non-traditional or first-generation, opt out of for-credit programs due to perceived time constraints. At multiple community colleges, faculty and staff regularly engage students in conversations about non-credit to credit pathways, encouraging them to not only obtain sustainable employment but also to stack credentials and badges while working toward a degree or certification.

One college administrator highlighted their approach within IT programs, emphasizing the importance of shaping students’ access to upward mobility during recruitment. Before starting IT programs, students are encouraged to pursue certifications and then transition into



“At our college, you’ll see pictures of Black men in nursing scrubs, White women in hard hats at construction sites, and Black women in auto mechanics bays. From a messaging standpoint, [our marketing team has] strategically used visuals to attract non-traditional students to programs, emphasizing the importance of linking data with these initiatives.”

degree-granting programs, recognizing the critical role of degrees for local employers and the competitive tech job market in their city.

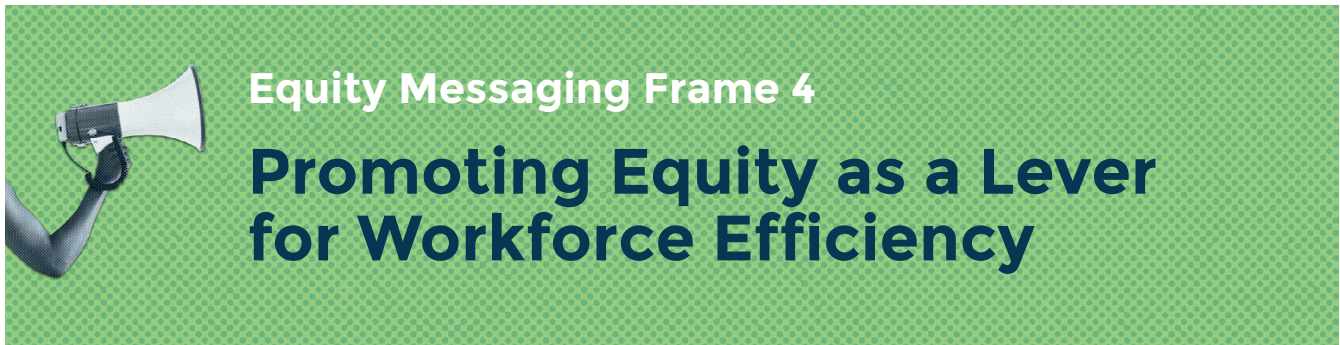
➤ **Increasing Access for Students Holding Sub-Baccalaureate Credentials**

Community colleges also use messaging about opportunity and access with employer partners to increase their students' access to paid internships, apprenticeships, programs traditionally unavailable to these students (for example, credentials related to user experience (UX) design other technology fields) and hiring opportunities. Despite employers across the country continuing to prioritize the hiring of graduates who have four-year degrees, colleges employ messaging strategies that advocate for access for graduates holding two-year degrees and sub-baccalaureate credentials.

One college used such messaging to collaborate with an employer, creating a STEM-focused internship tailored for community college students. The employer found that while their traditional internships with four-year institutions were effective for recruitment, they did not provide access to a diverse talent pool. The partnership led to increased opportunities for community college students traditionally underrepresented in STEM fields and has encouraged the college to consider pursuing similar partnerships in the future.

At another college, workforce leaders use both internal and external messaging to promote equal access and opportunity through their two-year degree and workforce training programs. Internally, they emphasize that “workforce is not a dirty word.” This college is in a region of the country where most individuals hold four-year degrees and “high paying office jobs,” which, according to one staff member, has contributed to the stigmatization of workforce programs and the students enrolled in them. In this context, external conversations also occur, albeit in less formal ways. For example, a senior vice president of the college recently engaged with a local CEO and used this “organic” opportunity to advocate for greater opportunities for community college graduates.





Colleges regularly employ equity messaging that frames their pursuit of racial equity and diversity as a means to improve workforce efficiency. By “workforce efficiency,” we refer to general productivity measures within the American workforce, particularly matching efficiency — the effectiveness of connecting job seekers to open positions (Hall & Wohl, 2018). According to our research, this framing may be useful to colleges when engaging employers and communicating that equity, especially racial equity, is a solution to inefficiencies in hiring and retention.

What drives this frame for equity?

Colleges often position equity as a lever for workforce efficiency to match the values of their employer and industry partners. Through research and initiatives like the [ACE-UP Community of Practice](#) and [Credential As You Go](#), we know that community colleges are eager to collaborate with business and industry on equity initiatives that lead to equal employment and economic outcomes for students of color. However, employer partners often have a different focus, which one college representative described as “tunnel vision.” Employers are primarily concerned with acquiring a more diverse workforce and filling roles through equitable practices. As a result, colleges emphasize equity, particularly racial equity, as a tool to help employers improve recruitment, hiring, and retention practices.

Additionally, colleges have their own goals that drive their pursuit and messaging of equity as a means to enhance workforce efficiency. For example, this messaging helps colleges and industry partners strategically address the “demographic cliff” facing state and local economies. Colleges also use this messaging to make pragmatic appeals for racial equity as a workforce strategy, encouraging employers to fill open positions and industries to create new jobs, thereby strengthening the economy. In using this framing, colleges also challenge a historical notion, especially among economists, that equity and efficiency are trade-offs (Schmid, 1993).

What does it look like to use this frame strategically?

When strategic, colleges frame equity as a means of improving workforce efficiency, aligning with employers’ goals while pursuing their own. Research suggests that framing equity in this way may resonate with the values of business and industry, making it more likely to persuade employers. It may also help them focus on key considerations when deciding whether to support equity, especially racial equity, as an issue (Nelson & Garst, 2005; Luong et al., 2019; Kaiser, 2020).

Our interviews indicate that colleges leverage this framing for equity to make inroads with business and industry, often meeting employers where they are when they have a “discrete need

to fill” in terms of hiring. As one representative acknowledged, “Businesses are coming to us because they want to diversify their workforce... this isn’t philanthropy. This is [their] hiring strategy.” Meeting employers where they are does not mean colleges “go around the issue” of racial equity. Instead, through strategic messaging, colleges address employers’ goals in ways that “open lines of communication and willingness,” giving colleges the opportunity to “chip away’ at racial inequities.”

➤ **Acknowledging Employers’ “Filling Vacancies” Goals**

Colleges engage in messaging to meet the goals of business and industry leaders, who often seek to partner with community colleges to “fill vacancies” and address talent diversity. According to one college leader, it is crucial to listen to business and industry partners with a “third ear,” aiming to understand and align with employers’ equity goals. Using this approach involves abandoning academic DEI terms, and instead focusing on the needs of various disciplines. By adopting this approach, the college has become “much more successful in employer engagement as it pertains to equity.” This includes improved engagement with faculty members, who represent experts and professionals in technical fields.

➤ **Highlighting Inefficiencies in Hiring & Retention**

Colleges use equity messaging with employers to highlight inefficiencies in their hiring and retention practices and demonstrate how more equitable approaches can help. At one college, a leader is using equity messaging to reframe the teacher shortage in their state, focusing on the mismatch of teachers to jobs. On the surface, the shortage seems to be due to a lack of diversity and representation in public schools. However, the shortage is also, perhaps more accurately, an inefficiency caused by training and hiring individuals who may not want teaching careers in diverse environments. Recognizing this inefficiency, the college developed an alternative teacher certification program within workforce development. This program is intended to recruit second-career teachers, particularly professionals of color, and place and retain them in Title I schools.



Several colleges are also working with manufacturing employers to emphasize the importance of work-based learning in hiring and retention efforts, thereby reducing inefficiencies. One college representative highlighted their collaboration with a manufacturing employer to create a training program for employees of color, particularly those of East African descent, to promote upward mobility. The employer's primary focus is on improving workforce efficiency by matching talent to jobs, rather than directly addressing equity for students.

Another college serves as a key source of workers for local manufacturing businesses. Administrators have leveraged this position to encourage employers to engage with students earlier in their education and training pathways. One administrator regularly discusses with employers the benefits of exposing students to industry standards, culture, and problem-solving needs before they enter the workforce. These early conversations have led to positive outcomes, with employers becoming more involved in career exploration events and offering opportunities such as field trips to work sites.

Training Human Resource Leaders to Promote Equitable Climate

When possible, colleges employ equity messaging in training with employers' human resources teams to improve workplace racial climate. Colleges engage in this training to support employer efforts to retain workers and create a more equitable environment.

One college secured a Department of Labor America's Promise grant to collaborate with healthcare employers, developing programs to address emergency medical needs related to the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of the partnership, employers agreed to provide implicit bias training and supervision classes for their front-line supervisors. One college leader explained that this requirement helped build trust with the community and achieve successful outcomes, noting, "Because the employers were there at the beginning, and people met the employers, and the employers said, 'You make it through this class, you're successful, we're going to hire you.' And they did." Recent data shows these employers have successfully retained workers, despite the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Colleges have also worked with manufacturing employers to improve worker retention. One college representative recounted a prior conversation with an employer in their city who wanted



"We show [employers] the numbers: 'These are the students coming in... If we're going to give you students, how do we ensure that you're going to take care of them outside of a paycheck?' With the demographics changing here in [our state], we do a lot of sessions and seminars for our employers to help them with different specialized populations."

to recruit the college's "best welders" for full-time positions. In response, the representative held an honest conversation about the need to increase wages to retain workers in these roles, which both surprised the employer and led to a wage increase. This representative later worked with the employer to conduct implicit bias training, which the employer described as "HR training on how to retain employees."

Another college representative discussed ongoing efforts to train HR personnel in inclusive hiring and recruitment. They emphasized the importance of seizing opportunities to implement such training and have worked closely with senior leaders, recruiters, and hiring managers at a large corporate partner to address recruitment issues. Despite turnover at the company, the college remains committed to training the employer's HR staff, noting, "It's just how we have to treat the business."

Establishing & Sustaining Employer Engagement

Colleges regularly collaborate with employers to help them fill vacancies while also structuring this assistance as sustained equity engagement. Multiple colleges have developed and promoted sustained pathways with their healthcare employers to improve workforce efficiency and equity.

One college representative emphasized the importance of building intentional partnerships "with the end goal in mind: employment and good, livable wages." When approached by a healthcare employer to help fill vacancies, the college worked to establish a career pathway that allowed students to complete required coursework and credentials quickly, enabling them to enter the workforce promptly. Another representative shared how their college developed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with a local university's health system to share faculty resources. This collaboration has strengthened healthcare pathways for community college students while addressing the system's high demand for frontline healthcare staff.

Colleges also advocate for apprenticeships as a means for improving workforce efficiency and equity. A representative from one college emphasized the flexibility of the apprenticeship model, noting that it has allowed the institution to meet employers needs without creating a la carte programming. Engaging with employers through the apprenticeship model has helped the college to develop more equitable educational experiences for students, which the representative described as "a direct result of us having conversations about different ways to serve this population... Being paid, being able to work while you get your education, [this] is a much better model for the people we serve."



Community colleges also engage in messaging that frames equity, and in particular racial equity, as the pursuit of place-based fairness for communities. According to our research, this framing may be useful for colleges seeking to engage external partners, especially coalitions or groups, in efforts to improve disparities in education, training, and employment within underserved neighborhoods and communities.

What drives this frame for equity?

This framing for racial equity is driven by colleges, funders, and community partners, who have shared goals for improving equity for communities through place-based strategies. Colleges often pursue and message equity on behalf of various communities, including:

- Rural communities, where people need greater mobility, including “high wage programs that lead to economic mobility;”
- Communities designated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2014) as high-poverty **rural, urban, and tribal promise zones**, where local governments partner with the federal government in efforts to improve education, safety, and the economy;
- City neighborhoods facing disproportionate violence, including gun violence and police brutality;
- Once-thriving communities of color, decimated by highway construction projects, the COVID-19 pandemic, and other events.
- Funders play a major role in driving equity messaging that emphasizes place-based fairness for communities. With support from public and private funders, colleges across the country have the opportunity to pursue innovative, impactful solutions to entrenched problems facing communities.

Funders play a major role in driving equity messaging that emphasizes place-based fairness for communities. With support from public and private funders, colleges across the country have the opportunity to pursue innovative, impactful solutions to entrenched problems facing communities.

Community partners also influence how colleges frame and message equity as place-based fairness. These partners – ranging from community-based organizations, cultural centers,

faith-based organizations, neighborhood services, local business organizations, local workforce boards, activist groups, and local school districts – collaborate with colleges to understand and meet the needs of people living near their campuses. Colleges regularly use equity messaging with these partners to gain a fuller picture of the needs of the community and to consider solutions meeting these needs.

What does it look like to use this frame strategically?

When strategic, colleges message and pursue place-based fairness as anchor institutions, emphasizing how their equity work benefits community members, including local residents. Colleges strategically advance equity through place-based strategies that include deep, sustainable efforts within their communities. In doing so, colleges embrace a role as “anchor institutions,” where they “apply the long-term, place-based economic power of the institution, in combination with its human and intellectual resources, to better the long-term welfare of the communities in which the institution is anchored” (Dubb et al., 2013, p. 46).

In the past few years, community colleges have received **growing recognition for their roles as anchor institutions**, particularly in pursuing and messaging racial equity through place-based strategies tied to community and economic development (Norris, Ullrich, & Waddell, 2023). One recent event involving the Supreme Court underscores the power of this approach. In 2024, **the Supreme Court refused to hear an anti-affirmative action case facing one Northern Virginia high school**, citing the school’s approach to messaging its new admissions strategy as one of place-based fairness (Marimow & Elwood, 2024).



Building Bridges with Local Community

Colleges recognize the importance of engaging with community leaders to gain insight into local needs and regularly host events aimed at promoting education and training opportunities while fostering community engagement. These events include program information sessions, career days, cultural film festivals, and summer day camps with local non-profits. Additionally, colleges invite leaders of community-based organizations to attend on-campus talks by presidents, vice provosts, and other administrators.

One college has made significant efforts to improve community engagement through strong leadership. Acknowledging past shortcomings, workforce development leaders at various levels have initiated conversations with community leaders and increased their participation in local events. Under a new president who values human-centered approaches, the college also now regularly meets with community partners, such as activist groups, neighborhood services, and organizations connected to the city's promise program. Workforce leaders have also revised their approach to grant applications, prioritizing early conversations with local nonprofits instead of bringing them in later in the process.

A college representative also emphasized the need for “boots on the ground” personnel who can provide residents with information on education, training, and services. While the college has opened campuses and service centers in neighborhoods traditionally excluded from economic opportunities, feedback revealed that many residents remain unaware of available resources. In response, the college is addressing access issues by hiring more staff from these neighborhoods to improve outreach and collaborating more with faith-based organizations.

Working in Coalitions to Achieve Impact

Colleges also work in coalition with others to maximize their impact when pursuing and messaging place-based fairness for communities. Collaborating with multiple partners helps colleges gain leverage in their efforts to promote and improve racial equity.

For example, one college utilized funding from a community block grant to launch a healthcare workforce center, which also serves as a health clinic for individuals in their community. A representative from this college emphasized that highlighting “statistics in their own backyard,”



“We’ve had several organizations [approach us] about biotech. If you’re going to get people in [this community] into an academic program like biotech... people have to be able to get there. They have to be able to get home. And, you better have somebody who knows those communities to go in there and really get those people.”

particularly those related to maternal and mental health, has been crucial in making the case for the center. Rather than using other equity messaging frames, such as equity based on race and gender, this representative framed the pursuit of the healthcare center as a direct response to community needs, which has proven effective in gaining buy-in from employers, community partners, and funders.

Another representative described their college's involvement in an umbrella workforce coalition, which serves as a city-specific workforce board. The coalition includes the college's non-credit workforce division, the chamber of commerce, community-based organizations like United Way, and community foundations. Together, this coalition regularly implements and promotes place-based strategies to address the city's workforce needs, such as piloting a program to connect individuals to short-term customer service credentials and jobs, and developing an online platform for counseling, training, and wraparound support. The representative highlighted the coalition's "heavy ground game" approach, focusing on initiatives that bring opportunities within arm's reach of community members.

At one college, the workforce development team maintains open communication with a local community leader who advocates for the needs of communities of color, particularly Black and Latino/a/x high school students and their families. This leader not only connects students seeking a GED to the college's workforce team but also engages in regular activism throughout the community. In doing so, they serve as a community conduit, amplifying the needs of local organizations and families and leveraging their influence to address collective challenges.

Another college has effectively engaged in messaging and made a significant impact through its role in developing the city's equity framework. The college is part of a coalition that includes its president, deans, and department chairs, along with the mayor's office, a national think tank, and various neighborhoods throughout the city. Due to the college's contributions to the framework and neighborhood involvement as well, the city launched a program to hire local residents, providing them with training at the college to earn state certifications to work in the water sector. These jobs have transformed lives, helping participants move off welfare and changing the trajectory of families.

The Critical Role of Public Funders

How do public funders contribute to colleges' messaging to advance equity as a workforce imperative: incentivizing and otherwise supporting colleges, as grantees, by tying racial equity goals and data to their funding?

Our findings shed light on how public agencies support colleges in framing and messaging equity, particularly racial equity, in their roles as public funders. We identified several key themes regarding how public funders advance equity; primarily, by setting funding rules and goals and by linking equity information and data to their funding. Through these actions, funders play a role in shaping how colleges pursue equity, ensuring that it remains central to their work and communications.

Advancing Equity Through Funding Rules & Goals

Public funders help establish equity as a grantee imperative, including the prioritization and use of equity data, by translating executive priorities and legislation into funding rules and goals. Legislation and administrative priorities set the standards and guardrails for incorporating equity into public funding opportunities. Simultaneously, public agencies work diligently to “ensure that equity is an intended goal of investments” and prioritized by grantees.

Writing Funding Rules (Federal Example):

Federal agencies translate executive orders and legislation into written funding opportunities, which, in turn, shape how they fund and collaborate with grantees. For example, some federal agencies, like the Department of Education, announce grant priorities for the coming year in the Federal Register. This formal approach to administering public funding requires agencies to adhere to the funding

priorities they articulate and issue for public comment at a specific point during the year.

In contrast, other agencies, like the Department of Labor, follow a different process that allows department leaders and staff to write Funding Opportunity Announcements (FOAs) throughout the year. This ability to issue FOAs on an ongoing basis impacts funding announcements, including the integration of data into these opportunities. One representative noted that this approach gives the department flexibility and more opportunities to apply staff expertise to funding decisions. It also allows them to leverage their knowledge of evolving grantee capacity and needs related to equity data, which helps support grantees in future funding rounds

Writing Funding Rules (State & Local

Example): At the state level, one department of higher education implemented a performance-based funding model that included equity-related weights and allocated additional funding to colleges focused on historically underserved students. In this state, the governor initiated a performance-based funding model for all colleges, including community colleges.

While the goals of the governor and other elected officials did not necessarily focus on equity, equity metrics were nevertheless incorporated into the formula. This was a result of the department's ability to accommodate the priorities of the governor while authoring funding rules, which meet executive priorities and the needs of colleges across the state.

In implementing the formula, the state avoided micromanaging specific elements, instead giving a panel of institutional representatives some “ownership over the individual metrics.” This approach allowed the panel to set the timeline and account for the missions of colleges that serve historically underserved students, including Black and Latino/a/x students and students from low-income backgrounds. By involving institutional representatives in the process, the state has provided support to colleges whose missions focus on the needs, experiences, and outcomes of historically underserved students.

Directing Funding to Specific

Organizations: Public funders sometimes prioritize directing grants or other funding to specific types of organizations, particularly BIPOC-led organizations and those that closely represent the experiences and outcomes of people and communities traditionally left out of workforce success. In these cases, public funders channel resources to colleges and other grantees focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion through their leadership and the populations they serve.

For instance, both the Department of Labor and Department of Education have previously published grant opportunities specifying that qualified institutions eligible to apply for

funding include historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving institutions (AANAPISIs), and other minority-serving institutions (MSIs). Similarly, the Department of Commerce offers grants aimed at recruiting economically disadvantaged workers into various industries. While the companies applying for these grants may not directly represent these workers, the application process – aiming for a “feasible goal” when working with corporations – requires that they partner with community-based organizations (CBOs) to recruit “disadvantaged populations and workers.”

Directing Funding To Building Capacity:

Public funders also direct funding to building the capacity of colleges and other grantees, with a focus on enhancing their ability to address equity issues. In conversations with funders at all levels, we learned about how they work with grantees to raise awareness and build the necessary capacity to tackle issues effectively. For example, both the Department of Labor and Department of Commerce offer grant opportunities aimed at helping colleges and employers build their capacity to pursue equity, including the ability to collect and use equity data on students and workers.



“When you write an FOA, you ask yourself, ‘What are the administration’s priorities right now?’ And so that changes... even within an administration, right? That also means that you present a lot of decisions to the administration. And say, ‘Beyond what’s in the legislation, these are some of the things we would propose based on your current priorities, our experience, and what we hear from applicants and grantees.’ Once we get input from the administration we can begin drafting.”

The Department of Labor provides technical assistance tied to the requirement that all grantees use the department's agency-wide performance management system for reporting. This technical assistance enables colleges and other grantees to delve into **deep equity**, moving beyond superficial metrics to a more meaningful use of equity data.

The Department of Labor also offers specific capacity-building grants for colleges and other grantees. The department's Strengthening Community Colleges (SCC) grant program is designed to help colleges build capacity to offer sector-based training and improve equitable outcomes for underrepresented groups in specific industries. With these grants, colleges are expected to enhance their ability to understand and improve outcomes for their specific focus population.

Similarly, at the state level, one state department of higher education provides technical assistance to help colleges transition to a performance-based funding formula that includes equity data and metrics. Although the legislation requiring the shift to a performance-based formula did not initially prioritize capacity-building, the state department of higher education recognized that colleges would need support to effectively understand and use equity and performance data. A representative from the department noted that this support has helped colleges identify which student groups require targeted assistance, such as advising.

Tying Equity Information & Data to Funding

One important way that public funders advance equity is by tying information and data to their funding, including the use of equity metrics. This approach not only compels colleges and

other grantees to prioritize equity but also helps colleges prioritize equity as an imperative within their institutions and in their collaborations with partners. Our interviews revealed multiple ways in which public funders incorporate equity information and data into their funding processes. By doing so, they ensure that grantees align their goals and strategies with the pursuit of equity, particularly racial equity.

Requiring Qualitative Descriptions of Equity Goals & Plans: In their funding announcements, such as Notices of Funding Opportunities (NOFOs), Requests for Proposals (RFPs), and other types of funding applications and formulas, public funders often require colleges and other grantees to describe the people and communities who will benefit from the funding if awarded. Federal funders use this approach in grant applications and announcements aimed at improving diversity and addressing equity gaps through sector-based strategies.

The Department of Commerce and Department of Energy have, for instance, required colleges and other grantees engaged in training and workforce development to outline their equity plans and strategies to qualify for funding. For example, the Department of Energy, in connection with the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, requires applicants to submit a community benefits plan outlining how they are investing in communities, including workforce development, overall community investments, and climate resilience. The CHIPS Act similarly mandates that applicants develop an equity strategy detailing how they will recruit, train, and retain economically disadvantaged populations. Additionally, the Economic Development Administration's (EDA's) Good Jobs Challenge required applicants to address their plans

for providing childcare, at a time **when a lack affordable, reliable childcare led millions of American women to leave the workforce** (Martin, 2023).

At the state and local levels, agencies also require colleges and other grantees to provide detailed information on the communities that the funding will serve and how it will be utilized. For example, a local funder on the West Coast mandates that grantees describe their goals for serving rural youth and workers across multiple grants. Additionally, numerous cities have required colleges, as grantees, to focus on specific neighborhoods with their programs and services. In this research, two colleges were asked to specify how they would use grant funding to improve educational outcomes in predominantly Black neighborhoods, particularly those disproportionately affected by COVID-19 and violence.

Requiring colleges and other grantees to articulate their equity goals and plans is one way funders screen applicants without requiring that grantees submit quantitative descriptive data or other data demonstrating impact. For instance, in a recent grant application published by Washington State, applicants were asked to submit the demographic makeup of their organization and the communities they intend

to serve with the funding. Multiple applicants were deemed ineligible to receive funding because they chose not to provide demographic information about the communities they intend to serve.

Requiring Grantees to Submit Customized Equity Outcomes: Public funders regularly require colleges and other grantees to plan for collecting data on their efforts to close equity gaps, specifying focus populations and customized outcomes they aim to address with the help of funding. These funding conditions encourage grantees to take meaningful steps to ensure that their efforts to address educational and workforce disparities are both measurable and impactful.

At the federal level, public funders often mandate that colleges and other grantees submit data on the equity gaps they seek to close through their use of funding. For example, the Department of Labor has training grants that require grantees to specify the number of trained professionals they will produce within a specific industry, such as welding. This differs from the department's capacity-building grants, which ask grantees to identify target populations without requiring specific numerical goals. The Department of Education similarly offers grant opportunities that require colleges



“With this funding opportunity... we built in something that allows [grantees] to make some changes along the way with respect to equity. And that’s because things shift all the time. [Grantees] dig in and say, ‘Yes, we’re going to do this great thing. We’re going to help women go into construction.’ And then, it may not turn out exactly the way they thought it would. So, then what?... We just have to anticipate that there will be change... This is a capacity-building grant, let’s build in some wiggle room here so that we can change some things if we need to.”

to propose initiatives aimed at “moving the needle” on enrollment, retention, and completion rates for students of color and others traditionally excluded from postsecondary success.

In another example, the Department of Commerce, through the CHIPS Act, provides incentives to employers, as grantees, in a process that permits grantees to set their own metrics. This flexibility is essential for meeting the CHIPS Act’s goals of transforming industries and shifting employer awareness and behavior. By not mandating reporting that might be seen as duplicative, the department helps grantees, including some of the largest corporations in the U.S., recognize their role in the future of the American economy.

State funders also require grantees to submit plans for closing equity gaps as a condition of receiving funding. One college representative shared that their institution recently secured a million-dollar grant from their city by committing to close a specific equity gap in the number of students from a particular group entering model pathways in high school and completing an associate’s or four-year degree.

Requiring Grantees to Submit Data to a Performance Management System:

Public funders often require colleges and other grantees to submit data on demographics and education and workforce outcomes. In some cases, funders implement and ask grantees to submit data to performance management systems, holding grantees accountable for improvements while easing the burden of data



capacity and system management on grantees.

Multiple federal funders, in accordance with legislation, mandate that colleges and other grantees submit data to centralized systems for tracking performance and informing future funding decisions.

For example, under the Higher Education Act and its reauthorizations, colleges and universities must submit data to the National Student Loan Data System (NSLDS) to be eligible for Title IV funds via federal student aid (FSA) programs. Similarly, the Department of Commerce, through the CHIPS Act, requires employers in the facilities and construction workforces to collect and report disaggregated data on recruitment, retention, and training through workforce and education partners. Additionally, states and colleges receiving Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Funds (Perkins V) must submit data for regular reporting. As part of this, colleges participate in the Conference of Local Needs Assessment (CLNA) with industry partners every two years, guided by a set of equity principles.

The Department of Labor also requires all grantees to submit disaggregated demographic data and other equity data to its performance management system, developed under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act

(WIOA). This approach reduces the burden on community colleges by standardizing the process of tracking progress on equity outcomes

Asking Grantees to Use Evidence & Contribute To What Works:

Funders are increasingly asking colleges and other grantees to connect their funding requests to data and evidence of what works in terms of impact. This includes requiring grantees to link their proposed initiatives to labor-market information demonstrating impact, as well as to evidence-based strategies aimed at improving equity gaps.

For example, the Department of Labor has encouraged colleges to set workforce equity goals that go beyond simply recruiting from underrepresented groups. Recent funding opportunities have asked grantees to tie their equity goals to labor market data, including pathways to middle- and high-wage jobs.

According to one community college, the Department of Labor increasingly emphasizes addressing equity gaps within sector-based strategies and requires extensive labor market data. Additionally, one grant mandates that grantees select evidence-based strategies to close equity gaps for specific “equity targets.”



“I think this [expectation for equity data] is a part of an ask, which is: ‘You are part of a nationally crucial industry, and there are things that we want to do nationally to build the resilience of the industry. But to do that, we need information about how things are going so far.’ That certainly helps as a framing piece. There is definitely a view that this is a nationally important industry. It’s an exciting thing to be a part of. There’s a lot of branding that I think is attractive and helps with that process.”



The Department of Education also offers grants that require applicants to outline the strategies they would use to close equity gaps related to retention and completion, particularly for “basic post-secondary metrics for underserved students.” One college, which was applying for such a grant at the time of this research, proposed multiple research-based initiatives focused on increasing equitable student learning outcomes among Black and Latino/a/x students.

Funders also ask grantees to contribute to their understanding of impact through research and evaluation, fostering continuous improvement and accountability. By requiring grantees to submit data to a performance management system, funders can evaluate the effectiveness of their funding while also providing grantees that supports their own improvement efforts.

The Department of Labor, Department of Education, and many other funders ask grantees to employ independent evaluators to analyze demographic data and make necessary adjustments. These evaluations also allow funders to conduct impact research across grantees. In our research, we heard about how the Department of Labor, through its Chief Evaluation Office, is conducting a national impact evaluation in which the national evaluator also provides grantees with ongoing data analysis to support capacity-building and continuous improvement. By requiring grantees to use and contribute to the evidence base, funders help ensure that equity remains a central priority in workforce development and educational outcomes.

Conclusion & Recommendations

This report highlights various approaches that community colleges use to advance equity, particularly racial equity, through strategic messaging and framing. Despite challenges such as anti-DEI legislation and political resistance to racial equity happening across states, colleges continue to frame equity in ways that resonate with their partners and advance their institutional missions to serve diverse students and communities. Public funders, through their use of equity metrics and data-driven requirements, also play a crucial role in supporting colleges and other grantees to ensure that equity remains a priority in both practice and communication.

We hope this research inspires and informs colleges as they make intentional decisions about how to engage their campus communities and external partners in equity efforts, with a particular focus on advancing racial equity.

A key finding from this research is that colleges frame equity as an imperative while simultaneously seeking to understand and align with the values of their communities and partners. Although this messaging may not always be intentional, prior research suggests it holds promise for fostering buy-in and increasing support for colleges' equity initiatives. Research from the FrameWorks Institute and other empirical studies (e.g., NASEM, 2016; Luong et al., 2019; Richardson, 2005; Nelson & Garst, 2005) underscores the critical role of message framing in shaping public support for racial equity in education and the workplace. Rather than varying based on geographic location, institutional size, or mission, colleges' equity messaging strategies tend to vary based on messaging audience.

Looking ahead, our team at CSW also recognizes several next steps that can build on this research. These steps include future efforts to support both research and practice, which advances equity through the strategic use of messaging. More research is needed to build on the dialogue initiated by this report and explore and identify effective strategies for pursuing and messaging equity, especially racial equity, across diverse institutional, political, and geographic contexts. For example, our research shows that colleges commonly advance equity as place-based fairness and emphasize the need to improve conditions for local communities facing disparities in education, training, and employment. However, this research only begins to uncover the potential of place-based fairness as a lens through which to strategically advance racial equity as an imperative. Expanding the research to include more colleges, public funders, and other partners – especially employers, community organizations, and K-12 institutions – would strengthen these initial findings.

Further exploration is also needed on how colleges use metrics to advance equity as a postsecondary and workforce imperative. Our findings show that colleges use equity metrics to prioritize outcomes for students of color and that public funders support these efforts. However, more insight is needed to understand how colleges and other workforce grantees employ metrics in various ways to improve opportunities for community college students, workforce efficiency through equity, and place-based fairness for communities. CSW is committed to continuing this research through ongoing work with community colleges and

employer partners, including through initiatives like the **ACE-UP Community of Practice**.

Another key area for future research involves understanding the various types of support colleges receive in advancing equity, including support from public and private funders. This includes exploring the role of legal, marketing, and data infrastructure support, as well as sustained philanthropic and public funding.

A key question to explore in follow-up to this research might be: “How do colleges and funders use equity data to message and pursue equity in ways that lead to demonstrable impacts for communities traditionally left out of educational and workforce success?” While our research offers initial insights into the importance of these supports in keeping colleges committed to pursuing and messaging equity as an imperative, more comprehensive insights are needed.

There is also value in identifying new messaging strategies that help colleges transition from transactional to transformational equity efforts with partners (Williams, 2023). In our research, only one college representative talked about advancing equity as an imperative through racial healing, justice, truth, and reconciliation.

However, we know that two- and four-year institutions across the country have racial healing initiatives in place, including centers funded by **the American Association of Colleges & Universities’ (AAC&U’s) Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Campus Initiative**. Future research should examine how colleges, particularly community colleges, implement such initiatives and their impact on racial equity for students. CSW plans to explore how colleges use racial healing and justice framing as part of their equity messaging in future iterations of this research.

Lastly, the field would benefit from testing and, through practice, refining the messaging frames highlighted in this research, which prior research suggests may help colleges advance equity. Despite challenges from anti-DEI legislation and politics, colleges are already employing these strategies, making it critical to explore their impact in greater detail while facilitating continuous improvement. CSW plans to conduct future practitioner-oriented and practitioner-led research, exploring and implementing messaging strategies in various contexts and developing toolkits and action guides to support future efforts.

As we move forward, we recognize the commitment of community colleges and public funders to advancing equity is essential for promoting racial equity in today’s complex DEI climate. We encourage the audiences of this report to engage in this critical dialogue, share and explore best practices, and collaborate on initiatives that deepen the knowledge and practice of strategic equity messaging and related supports.

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