Classified Professionals Role in Achieving Institutional Equity with Dr. Frank Harris III - Part 1

00:00:00 **Dr. Harris**

When we ask students to talk about who's supporting them and who are the people that validate them, and who are the folks that give them support and tell them that they believe in them, and they can be successful. More often than not, students mention and highlight a classified professional in their conversation.

00:00:15 **Dr. Harris**

And then we also know that classified professionals provide critical support to students that often goes unnoticed and unrecognized. And so, this spirit and ethic of care, authentic care about students, is absolutely critical to achieving our equity goals, to achieving institutional transformation for equity.

00:00:33 **Dr. Harris**

And one thing that we have to do is figure out how do we harness it, how do we make this a shared institutional value so that it's classified professionals, but it's not just classified professionals that are conveying these messages to students.

00:00:48 **Christina Barsi**

Hi, I'm Christina Barsi-

00:00:49 **Sun Ezzell**

And I'm Sun Ezzell, and you're listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast.

00:00:53 **Christina Barsi**

Our mission is to find ways to keep your ear to the ground, so to speak - by bringing to you the activities and events you may not have time to attend, the resources on campus you might want to know more about, the interesting things your colleagues are creating, and the many ways we can continue to better help and guide our students.

00:01:12 **Sun Ezzell**

We bring to you the voices of Mt. SAC, from the classroom to completion.

00:01:14 **Student**

And I know I want to achieve my goals, and I know people here are going to help me to do it.

00:01:25 **Teacher**

She's a sociology major and she's transferring to Cal Poly, Pamona! Psychology major, English major ...

00:01:25 **Sun Ezzell**

From transforming part-time into full-time-

00:01:27 **Student**

I really liked the time that we spent with Julie, about how to write a CV and a cover letter-

00:01:34 **Christina Barsi**

Or just finding time to soak in the campus.

00:01:36 **Student**

To think of the natural environment around us as a library.

00:01:40 **Christina Barsi**

We want to keep you informed and connected to all things Mt. SAC. But most importantly, we want to keep you connected with each other. I'm Christina Barsi, Mt. SAC alumni, and producer of this podcast.

00:01:52 **Sun Ezzell**

And I'm Sun Ezzell, Learning Assistance Faculty and Professional Learning Academy Coordinator.

00:01:56 **Christina Barsi**

And this is the Magic Mountie Podcast.

00:02:02 **Sun Ezzell**

Hi, this Sun Ezzell, welcome back to the Magic Mountie Podcast. In today's episode, we bring you part one of a very special classified professional development day keynote speech by Dr. Frank Harris III, on the critical role of classified professionals in student success and achieving institutional equity.

00:02:19 **Sun Ezzell**

Classified professionals are likely to not only be the first point of contact for new students, but also to engage with them in a moment of crisis, or provide connection, encouragement, and support that is often critical to whether a student takes that next step in their education.

00:02:35 **Sun Ezzell**

In this episode, we spend some time becoming aware of what stage of growth we're at within our own education around equity, how to hold each other accountable, and what we can start to pay attention to in order to become better advocates for students.

00:02:52 **Sun Ezzell**

The challenges that we continually address like basic needs support and digital equity are now escalated during this time of the Coronavirus pandemic. And if you didn't get to attend CPD day, part one of Dr. Harris's talk can help us all begin to reassess what it means to be equity-minded during this time. Enjoy.

00:03:15 **Cynthia**

Hi everybody, and welcome back. The moment you've been waiting for our keynote, which we're very excited to be hosting, is going to be introduced by Dr. Lisa Rodriguez. She's the Assistant Director of Professional and Organizational Development, as well as the project lead for the title Five Grant, creating an equity-minded campus culture to improve student outcomes. So please welcome Lisa Rodriguez.

00:03:40 **Dr. Rodriguez**

Thank you very much, Cynthia. Today, I'm pleased to introduce Dr. Frank Harris III, who will be taking the place of Dr. Luke Wood, who had some unforeseen circumstances.

00:03:49 **Dr. Rodriguez**

Frank Harris is a professor of postsecondary education and co-director of the Community College Equity Assessment Lab (CCEAL) at San Diego State University. And he's best known for his expertise in racial inequity and postsecondary education. And he's made very important contributions to the knowledge bank about college student development and the social construction of gender and race in college context. His work prioritizes populations that have been historically underrepresented and underserved in education.

00:04:21 **Dr. Rodriguez**

Dr. Harris is also founder of CORA, the Center for Organizational Responsibility and Advancement. And to date, more than 280 Mt. SAC faculty and staff have engaged in the racial microaggressions or unconscious bias and equity and education certificates at Mt. SAC since 2019.

00:04:41 **Dr. Rodriguez**

Dr. Harris is the co-editor and author of four books; College Men and Masculinities: Theory, Research, and Implications for Practice, Teaching Men of Color in the Community College, Teaching Boys and Young Men of Color, and Supporting Men of Color in the Community College.

00:04:58 **Dr. Rodriguez**

His commentary has been sought by several high profile media outlets, including Diverse: Issues in Higher Education, The New York Times, The Los Angeles Times, The Chronicle of Higher Education, CNN, and others to name a few.

00:05:13 **Dr. Rodriguez**

I first met both Dr. Harris and Dr. Wood in Washington, D.C at a minority-serving institute where he led a standing room only presentation on the M2C3 initiative. But today, we have a guaranteed seat to hear him speak on the importance of the role of classified professionals in advancing student achievement.

00:05:35 **Dr. Rodriguez**

So I'd like to turn it over to Dr. Harris.

00:05:38 **Dr. Harris**

Thank you so much for the warm and wonderful introduction Dr. Rodriguez. I remember being in D.C at that meeting and it seemed like it was a long time ago, but it really was only maybe like four years ago. So it wasn't that long.

00:05:49 **Dr. Harris**

To everyone who's joining us today, thank you so much. I know that we spend a lot of time on Zoom, and I am honored and appreciate that you would choose to spend a little bit of time with me because I know that the time you spend on Zoom is very valuable and I don't take it for granted.

00:06:04 **Dr. Harris**

And as Dr. Rodriguez shared, the focus of our time today is to talk about the critical role of classified professionals as it relates to student success, institutionalizing equity. And I think it's really important to talk about this in the midst of the global pandemic that we're all challenged with, COVID-19.

00:06:24 **Dr. Harris**

So, in terms of the objectives for today, they're fairly straightforward. We're going to talk about trends and issues that influence belonging, success, engagement, and so forth, for historically our underrepresented and underserved students, with a particular focus on the COVID-19 pandemic.

00:06:39 **Dr. Harris**

And then of course, and probably most importantly, I will share what I describe as some equity-minded support strategies to facilitate the success of these students in light of the pandemic. And when I talk about support strategies, I know as classified professionals represent a huge range of educators on a college campus. And what I try to do in presenting these strategies, is propose strategies that can be broadly applied. Some of them, obviously, they're going to have to be applied in context.

00:07:08 **Dr. Harris**

If you're working in financial aid, for example, it might look a little bit differently than if you're working with students in the welcome center or an outreach or another context.

00:07:17 **Dr. Harris**

Before we begin, I do want to make sure that we have a shared understanding of what equity is and what it means, recognizing that our concept of equity, at least in California, has grown and emerged over the years. And now, so historically, and even to this day, equity has always been about focusing on disproportionate impact, particularly for students who h ave been historically marginalized in education.

00:07:41 **Dr. Harris**

What we see here is by no means an exhaustive list, but these are certainly groups that consistently show up as disproportionately impacted or not well-served in education. And I also recognize that there's a lot of intersectionality that exists among and between these groups.

00:07:59 **Dr. Harris**

And so I think it's important to keep in mind that our students, they never just ... they have multiple salient identities that intersect and that create the unique people that they are, but also the unique experience that they have.

00:08:11 **Dr. Harris**

And then of course, I'd never have a conversation about equity without acknowledging the important work and concept that Dr. Estela Bensimon has given us, particularly her work around equity-mindedness. We know as community college educators, in particular, equity-mindedness is the way that we bring equity to life, is how we actualize and make equity actionable.

00:08:34 **Dr. Harris**

Dr. Bensimon talks about several characteristics of equity-mindedness; one being racially conscious. So recognizing that when we look at racially minoritized students and communities, they're not just disproportionately impacted in education, they also experience disproportionate impact in almost every important social institution in context that impacts their lives and the lives of their loved ones.

00:08:58 **Dr. Harris**

We also have to look at equity as a matter of institutional responsibility and accountability. So it's no longer asking questions about student success, but we also have to ask questions about institutional success and institutional readiness. And all the things that we've traditionally asked of students, we also have to ask that of our institutions.

00:09:18 **Dr. Harris**

We have to enact efforts to intentionally affirm minoritized students and their racialized identities. We cannot look at race as a liability. We have to in fact, see race and racial-ethnic identities as an asset that could actually be leveraged to facilitate success.

00:09:34 **Dr. Harris**

And then we have to engage in a critical reflection that's necessary to ask ourselves, "What am I doing as a classified professional that's allowing an equity to exist or persist? Or what am I doing to actually disrupt and challenge inequity?"

00:09:54 **Dr. Harris**

And then lastly - and this last one, it's something that we haven't traditionally talked about as educators, is about the role of caring. As educators, we have to really care about our students. And not just care about them in a casual sense, but we have to care about them deeply, personally, about their lives, their lived experiences, their wellbeing, and their success.

00:10:16 **Dr. Harris**

So in other words, we have to see students and their success as a reflection of who we are and our effectiveness as classified professionals. So we have to be personally invested in this with them, and students have to know that.

00:10:30 **Dr. Harris**

And of course, I would be remiss if I didn't talk about what does equity-mindedness look like in the COVID-19 pandemic. We know that, of course, this fall, we are preparing to continue to deliver students a remote learning experience. It's going to have some implications for teaching, it's going to have some implications for student support services.

00:10:51 **Dr. Harris**

And when the pandemic first became upon us, we were very intentional and very focused on making sure that students had the basic technology that they need to even get online and participate. And that's important, that's going to continue to be important. But we also have to think about another concept that's equally important, and this is the concept of digital equity.

00:11:19 **Dr. Harris**

So basically, what digital equity means, is that we have to make sure that students not only have the technology, so the laptops and access to broadband, but they also have the technological knowledge that they need to seamlessly access these spaces, these virtual learning spaces, and to make meaningful contributions within them.

00:11:38 **Dr. Harris**

And then we also have to talk about the important role of classified professionals and the incredible work and capacity that they bring, that you all bring, to the work of community colleges, especially as it relates to institutionalizing equity.

00:11:54 **Dr. Harris**

We know, for example, that classified professionals are absolutely critical for several reasons. First, they are more likely than other educators to engage students during their very first interactions on campus. So when a student sets foot on campus, decides, "Hey, I want to attend Mt. SAC, I think that'd be a good place for me to attend. Let me go to campus and figure out how to get enrolled or let me log on to Zoom these days and figure out," more often than not, they're going to be interacting with several classified professionals before they interact with a faculty member.

00:12:25 **Dr. Harris**

We also know that classified professionals are more likely than others to encounter students during times of crisis and difficulties, when students are most vulnerable when they're having the most difficulty when they're on a verge of making a decision; "Do I stay or do I go?" It's the frontline support staff, our classified colleagues that are most likely to encounter students in these times of crisis.

00:12:48 **Dr. Harris**

So those interactions, the communications that occur in those situations, the referrals that happen, the validation, and encouragement is absolutely central during those times.

00:12:59 **Dr. Harris**

We also know that when it comes to having educators of color, particularly educators who share the racial, ethnic backgrounds of diverse students, more often than not, they're all going to be classified professionals. We often hear some of our work (particularly our qualitative work), when we ask students to talk about who's supporting them and who are the people that validate them and who are the folks that give them support and tell them that they believe in them, and they can be successful - more often than not, students mention and highlight a classified professional in that conversation.

00:13:29 **Dr. Harris**

And then we also know that classified professionals provide critical support to students that often goes unnoticed and unrecognized.

00:13:36 **Dr. Harris**

Taking this conversation one step further, I want to highlight a quote that came from one of the books that Luke and I - actually an article that Luke and I wrote back in 2005, in talking about the important role that classified professionals play. This is our work on men of color. This was a piece that we called Train the Janitor.

00:13:55 **Dr. Harris**

And in this piece, there were some other things that were discussed. But in particular, the quote that I highlight here is that the students noted that it was these individuals who were more likely than their faculty to interact with them and encourage them with messages such as, "You can do it, I'm proud of you, keep your head in the books" or to ask them how they were doing, to check in on them.

00:14:16 **Dr. Harris**

And so this spirit and ethic of care, authentic care about students, it's absolutely critical to achieving our equity goals, to achieving institutional transformation for equity. One thing that we have to do is figure out how do we harness it, how do we make this a shared an institutional value, so that it's classified professionals, but it's not just classified professionals that are conveying these messages to students.

00:14:41 **Dr. Harris**

And then I think we have to be mindful about the many pressures that students are facing in the midst of the pandemic. We know digital access is a huge issue. We're talking about a lack of access to basic technology. But as well, there's technological knowledge that I talked about.

00:14:58 **Dr. Harris**

We know that students, all of our students ... not all of our students, I should say - but a critical mass of our students have struggled with basic needs and security. And I think our colleges in our State have done a good job of being more intentional and addressing basic needs insecurities. At the same time, we also know that when we talk about the impact of COVID-19 and the pandemic, that the pandemic is likely going to exacerbate insecurities related to basic needs.

00:15:27 **Dr. Harris**

Having access to campus resources, staff and information is another challenge. Particulalrly for students who are most comfortable. I mean, often relied on being able to access this information and these people and educators in person.

00:15:40 **Dr. Harris**

And then this last one is about struggling with balancing the demands of home, which can include lost wages, which can include homeschooling children, which can include caring for other family members while also making a transition to remote learning, keeping up with classes. And then there's also the issue of isolation and a sudden loss of a community with no longer being able to physically go to campus.

00:16:03 **Dr. Harris**

I will say this, it's also important to recognize that our disproportionately impacted students often struggle with these same demands prior to COVID-19, but the intensity of these issues has compounded as a result of the pandemic. And so, in other words, the students who are most vulnerable within the environmental domain (which I'll talk about shortly) have been hit the hardest by COVID-19.

00:16:28 **Dr. Harris**

Also, I want to highlight this issue phenomenon known as racial battle fatigue that I think is important. And this is not only important for students, but it's also important in making sense of the experiences of our colleagues, particularly colleagues of color as well.

00:16:45 **Dr. Harris**

This concept comes from Professor William Smith who's a professor at the University of Utah. And this framework is incredibly illuminating, in helping us recognize the cumulative effects of chronic racism. And while most of us have focused primarily on racial microaggressions, when we're talking about the impact of race on the lived experiences of students, faculty, and classified professionals in academia - what I appreciate about this concept, is that it extends the conversation that we began about racial microaggressions and helps us to understand that racism is not just something that happens every so often, but it's a phenomenon that affects nearly every aspect of the lived experiences of people of color.

00:17:30 **Dr. Harris**

And because of this, because the effects of racism are enduring, they really do become a core part of people of colors' life history and lived experiences.

00:17:41 **Dr. Harris**

And Dr. Smith also likens racial battle fatigue to a concept known as combat stress syndrome. This is essentially what happens when soldiers (so military personnel who are in combat zones) experience stress as a result of being immersed in high-risk environments where the threat of being attacked or killed is ever-present.

00:18:06 **Dr. Harris**

And now, I know some of us are probably thinking, well, our students certainly are not at risk or at danger of being killed on our campuses. I certainly would echo that perspective. But what we also have to think about is chronic racism has some similar physiological effects of combat stress syndrome. There's also many psychological symptoms as well that we also see presented here as well.

00:18:35 **Dr. Harris**

And the point that I'm making here is that these symptoms are often misdiagnosed and erroneously attributed to factors other than racialized stress. We also know that our colleagues who have training and professional licensure in the mental health professions, they're not always exposed to this notion of racial battle fatigue.

00:18:54 **Dr. Harris**

And given everything that I've discussed thus far, I do think we have to acknowledge and recognize that there are a range of perspectives when it comes to equity, especially when it comes to racial equity . To highlight this, I do want to talk about a taxonomy that Luke and I developed several years ago.

00:19:13 **Dr. Harris**

So some of you, if you've heard Luke or I speak in the past, you've probably seen this before. If you are engaged in any of the core learning, online learning, training certificate programs, particularly the ones on teaching and supporting men of color, you've probably seen this as well. But for those who haven't, I do think it's worth taking some time to provide a brief overview.

00:19:31 **Dr. Harris**

So this taxonomy has two constructs. The first construct we describe as competence, is represented at the very top of the taxonomy, and is represented with the labels, "know what to do" and "don't know what to do." And we can think about competence as relating to an educator's knowledge and understanding of equity and equity-minded practices. I know what equity is, I know what equity mindedness is, I know how to employ those practices in my role as a classified professional, and I'm actually doing it. It's a core part of my identity as a professional educator.

00:20:06 **Dr. Harris**

Now, here's what we also know; is that knowing what something is and knowing how to perform something is important, but insufficient when it comes to actually following through and doing it. And so that's why this second construct that's presented is also important. And we can think about this construct as motivation. And it's represented at the left of the figure and labeled "willingness to employ practices" and "unwillingness to employ practices."

00:20:35 **Dr. Harris**

So to start, I have to have the knowledge of what equity is, what it means, how to practice it. And I have to be willing and motivated to do it. So let's start with KW.

00:20:47 **Dr. Harris**

This captures the perspective educators who know what equity-mindedness is, they practice it on a regular basis, they're doing it. And we call this group, perhaps predictably The Choir. And we call this group The Choir for a couple of reasons, but primarily because more often than not, it's The Choir that's leading equity efforts and conversations on your campuses.

00:21:10 **Dr. Harris**

It's The Choir that's doing it. If there's a voluntary training on equity or a voluntary taskforce that's focused on equity, it's The Choir that's the first to show up and participate. And oftentimes, participate without any expectation of getting anything in return.

00:21:26 **Dr. Harris**

Now, we also have The Allies. The only thing that's separated The Allies from The Choir is that The Allies having had the training, the professional learning, the coaching and the mentoring in order to really gain some expertise on equity-mindedness and equity-minded practices.

00:21:45 **Dr. Harris**

However, if you give them the opportunity to learn, they could just as easily be a part of The Choir. Now, it would be easy if we could just stop there, right? But here's what we know, is that if the goal is to institutionalize equity, if the goal is for equity to be a shared value, and equity-mindedness to be a shared value throughout the institution, where all classified or critical mass of our classified professionals understand it, embrace it and practice it on a regular basis - that we can't just stop with The Allies and The Choir. We have to engage other perspectives as well.

00:22:22 **Dr. Harris**

So let's look at our next group that we call The Resistors. Now, The Resistors haven't embraced equity-mindedness, and they really don't see it as necessary, and quite frankly, they're not motivated to do it. And we find in our work that there are two types of resistors; active resistors and passive resistors.

00:22:39 **Dr. Harris**

A ctive resistors are the ones who are the most vocal and forthcoming about their opposition to equity efforts. T hey a re the folks who are asking, "Why are we doing this? This is not important. This is a waste of time, this is a waste of money, this is a waste of other resources. Who's this Frank Harris guy? Why are we inviting him to speak to us? What a sham, what a fraud."

00:23:02 **Dr. Harris**

Now, here's the good news; most resistors are not active resistors . Now, we often assume that they represent a larger contingent of people than they actually do. But the fact of the matter is most resistors are passive resistors. And what that means is that they're not going to be as vocal and transparent about their opposition to equity, but they're also going to avoid any and every opportunity to be authentically engaging.

00:23:25 **Dr. Harris**

And then we have The Defiant. Now, these are the folks who have been trained, they have a good understanding of equity, they have a good understanding of equity-mindedness. However, they refuse to enact the practices with the students who need the support the most.

00:23:38 **Dr. Harris**

So they might be willing to support students or guard the way for students who they know or students from their neighborhood, or the kids from their kids' baseball team or whatever it may be - but they're not going to be as intentional about supporting disproportionately impacted students.

00:23:56 **Dr. Harris**

Now one time, Luke and I were presenting this framework at a conference, and we got some input from a colleague who said, "Luke, Frank, this is a really illuminating taxonomy. I like it, it makes a lot of sense. I can see myself in it, I can see my colleagues in it. But it's missing something. What about the folks who think they're equity-minded, who think they're part of The Choir, but they have absolutely no idea what they're doing?"

00:24:23 **Dr. Harris**

So Luke and I took a little bit of time to reflect on that and decided to add a fifth group to our taxonomy. And we called this group The Oblivious. And we call them Oblivious because one can become oblivious in one of three ways.

00:24:37 **Dr. Harris**

The first way is when we do our equity work from a savior complex. When we believe that our work is about saving students rather than empowering students. And we've got to understand that equity work and being equity-minded educators, and in particular, being an equity-minded classified professional is ultimately about identifying barriers that get in the way and eliminating those barriers, so that students could thrive and really leverage their strengths and leverage the assets that they bring to our learning community.

00:25:09 **Dr. Harris**

We also can become oblivious with our work when we're non-reflective in our work. So this occurs when our words and the values we espouse are not aligned with our actions and the ways in which we teach and serve students. These are the folks who can really articulate a beautifully articulated definition about equity and equity-mindedness, tell you what it is, cite all of Dr. Bensimon's work. But when you look at the way that they're supporting students and working with students - they're microaggressing them, they're not validating them. They're doing everything that equity-mindedness says we shouldn't do.

00:25:50 **Dr. Harris**

And then the last one is grandstanding. Now grandstanding occurs when our commitment to equity is more about developing a reputation, advancing our own careers, or being perceived a certain way by our colleagues.

00:26:06 **Dr. Harris**

And I shared this taxonomy for several reasons. The first is that we have to be able to see ourselves in this. And the fact of the matter is, I've kind of like articulated these groups in these very neat and discrete boxes, but none of us are The Choir at all times. And none of us are always resistant.

00:26:29 **Dr. Harris**

Sometimes we are defying. Sometimes, we're allies. Some of us work better with some population of students than we do other populations of students. And so, it's important to recognize who we are and where we are in this. And to identify where do we have some implicit and unconscious bias and make sure that we're pursuing the type of professional learning, experiences, and opportunities that allow us to build our capacity to be able to work effectively and successively with all students.

00:26:59 **Dr. Harris**

And the second reason why I share the taxonomy is this; is that we have to understand that we can't take the same approach with every colleague. To speak to this point, we developed this little framework called the four Es. We have to empower The Choir. So The Choir needs to know what they're doing. It's important, it contributes to the institution's larger equity goals. Keep doing it. It's aligned with what the research says is important, it's aligned with what students tell us - keep doing it.

00:27:29 **Dr. Harris**

With The Allies, we have to educate The Allies. We have to give Allies the training and the coaching and the professional development, so they can build their capacity to be equity-minded educators, to be equity-minded, classified professionals.

00:27:41 **Dr. Harris**

And then with our passive Resistors and The Defiant, we have to encourage them. And more specifically, we have to encourage them to care. We have to encourage them to see and understand why equity is important for them, and how it contributes to making our institution a better institution.

00:27:59 **Dr. Harris**

And then with The Oblivious, we have to enlighten The Oblivious. We have to have critical, but collegial conversation that helps folks understand like, "Frank, you know, I really appreciate who you are, I appreciate having you as a colleague, and I really appreciate what you bring. But the ways in which you engaged that student who came to our office is really not aligned with who we say we are as an institution and what we value."

00:28:29 **Dr. Harris**

And that's what we have to do. We all have to assume some collective responsibility and accountability, not only for ourselves and building our own capacity for equity-mindedness, but for facilitating and supporting that in our colleagues as well.

00:28:45 **Christina Barsi**

Thank you for listening to the Magic Mountie Podcast. Remember to subscribe on Apple podcasts , Spotify, or wherever you like to get your podcasts, so you can listen in the car, in your office, or however you like to listen.

00:28:59 **Christina Barsi**

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