



Toward a More Perfect Institution

Reflections from California Community College Leaders on Racism, Anti-Blackness and Implicit Bias

By Edward Bush, Susanna Cooper, Michal Kurlaender and Francisco C. Rodriguez with Anna Marie Ramos

IN THE WAKE of the most recent spate of police killings of Black Americans, the California Community Colleges are grappling with a racial reckoning as urgent as the one playing out in society at large. In June 2020, Wheelhouse sought to understand how community college leaders experienced and led their institutions through the pain and calls to action engendered by racist acts.

Specifically, we administered a short survey of current and former Wheelhouse Fellows—California Community College presidents, chancellors and superintendent/presidents (CEOs) who have participated in Wheelhouse leadership development programs and networks over the past four years. We asked them about their personal and institutional experiences with racism and bias; about barriers to creating more equitable campus environments; and about their own capacity to lead on these issues.

CEOs' responses were in equal parts illuminating, sobering and inspiring, reflecting the complexity and urgency of confronting racism and anti-Blackness. These candid testimonies and reflections provide a clear view to deep personal and institutional experiences with racism and bias in the context of one of the nation's most diverse, accessible and equity-aspiring systems of higher education. Our hope is that the themes extracted from the survey responses will inform and contribute to the conversations and actions necessary to improve student success, equity and the racial climate across the California Community Colleges, and thus the state and nation at large.

TOPLINES

- > Community College CEOs express hope about recent momentum for conversations and actions on race and equity, but are realistic about challenges they face—both personal and institutional—in leading for change.
- > Racism, bias and anti-Blackness, in particular, show up on college campuses in many forms and venues. They are felt personally by many CEO respondents and manifest across their campuses and districts, from classroom interactions and hiring processes to language, tone and microaggressions that damage student, staff, faculty and administrators' sense of efficacy and belonging.
- > CEOs of color bring lived experiences that are of particular value in understanding and navigating conversations about race, and that may have been undervalued in the past.
- > While most CEOs feel generally well-positioned in their capacity to facilitate conversations on race and equity at their institutions, some expressed uncertainty or discomfort. Many revealed significant frustration over structural barriers they described as impeding progress toward more welcoming, equitable institutions.
- > CEOs are both answering and issuing calls to action to transform their institutions to tackle racism and anti-Blackness.

“Many of our students/alumni and long-term faculty and staff will speak with pride about how inclusive the campus is to all. The manifestation of racism is more subtle, but prevalent. Implicit bias is a significant problem. Deeply held beliefs (e.g., bootstrap theory) are entrenched in the culture of subsets of constituencies influenced by socio-economic status. Provincial attitudes resistant to change are rooted in the campus community as well as the communities we serve.”

How Racism and Bias Show up on Campus

CEOs shared the many ways in which racism shows itself on their campuses, ranging from manifestations of overtly racist language or graffiti to subtler but still damaging instances of offhand remarks, assumptions, stereotypes and the silence or discomfort of members of the campus community. They described the broad variety of campus settings where racism is experienced, from the classroom and student services to hiring processes, the trustee boardroom and broader structures of inequality. And they detailed the array of human interactions that take place across a given day—among students, faculty, staff providing student services, campus police or security, and administrators in cabinet—where racist or insensitive comments or actions are experienced and do damage. Said one: “I like to think it’s unconscious bias. I think it shows up throughout our

institution, in and out of the classroom. I know it shows up in our policies and practices, and in our collective assumptions and beliefs.”

The most often cited forms of racism were in hiring and promotion processes and a resulting lack of faculty diversity (Figure 1). Several CEOs described a set of “unnecessary disqualifications of minority candidates for dubious reasons”, while others described simply a disregard for the need for diversity in the composition of the faculty. As one CEO noted: “Many faculty on committees do not proactively seek out candidates of color OR if there are candidates of color, they do not advance them; not place[ing] ‘race’ front and center of conversations and decision making.” Recent scholarly and advocacy research has established that, while community college

DATA AND METHODS

In mid-June of 2020, approximately two weeks after the killing of George Floyd and the ensuing protests and calls to action, Wheelhouse sought to understand how its network of CEOs was experiencing and leading during these times. More specifically, we wanted to capture the moment, elevate the obstacles and opportunities faced by CEOs as they attempt to address issues of racial equity at their institutions, and understand their own sense of efficacy in guiding their campuses and districts on these issues.

We sent an anonymous, nine-question survey to 63 CEOs in our network. Nearly two-thirds (41) responded. Questions probed how anti-Blackness and other forms of racism or implicit bias manifest themselves at their institutions, and what these leaders believe are the biggest impediments to addressing racism on their campuses. We asked whether they themselves had been a target of racism and/or implicit bias in their leadership positions, and what investments they perceived as necessary to truly address structural and institutional racism at community colleges. Finally, we wanted to know whether and in what ways the protests and national dialogue have created new momentum at their institutions to

tackle racism and advance social justice, and how equipped they feel to lead such efforts.

Open-ended responses were evaluated independently by all five authors to arrive at a set of thematic findings. As much as possible, we offer these leaders’ reflections in their own words. All words and phrases that appear in quotations in this document are taken directly from survey responses. In places where respondents self-identified by race, we make an effort to highlight differences in the experiences of CEOs depending on their race/ethnicity. Although the anonymity of the questionnaire prevents us from comparing the representativeness of these CEOs’ responses to the full population of Community College CEOs, this sample self-revealed great diversity in both individual characteristics of CEOs—by race, age, gender, and sexual orientation—as well as by campus characteristics—rural, urban, large, and small, with varying levels and types of student diversity. Most respondents volunteered that their White and/or Latinx student populations were significantly larger than the population of Black students served.

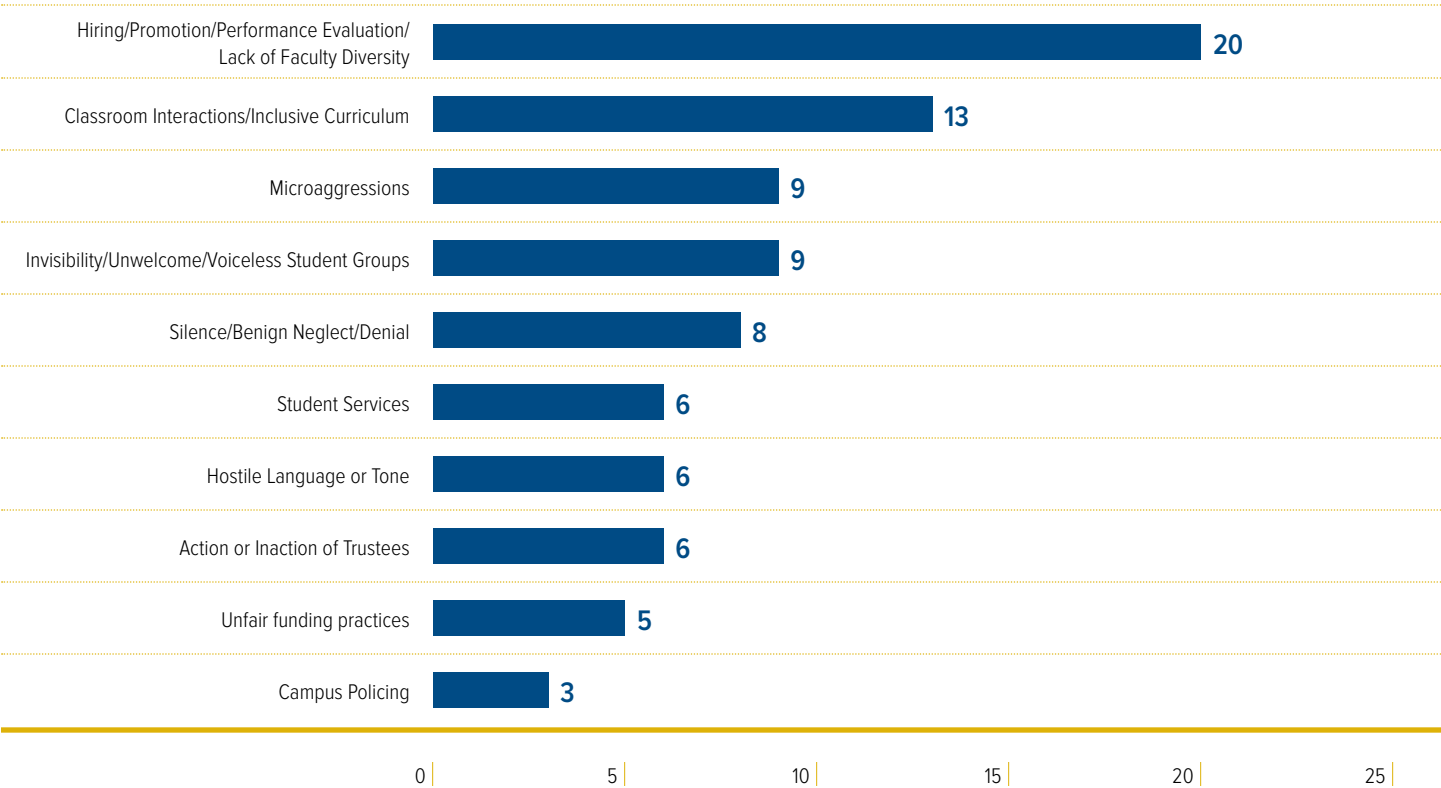
faculty tend to be more representative of the students they serve than faculty in other segments of higher education, pronounced racial differences between students and faculty persist at most community college campuses.¹ Other research shows that increasing faculty diversity may be particularly helpful in reducing academic disparities for students of color.²

CEOs also specified student experiences more generally as an area of concern, including direct mistreatment and disrespect, acts of microaggressions (comments or actions that subtly, often unintentionally, express a prejudiced attitude toward a minoritized person or group), and an overall disregard for diversity and the recognition of racial identity. Many described a lack of connectedness and belonging experienced by Black students in particular, and, in some cases, more generally by students of color. “I think the biggest theme is the sense that Black students and employees do not feel welcome or included at all times,” said one. A specified place where this shows up was in the classroom, where both content and pedagogy could greatly influence students’ sense of connectedness and support.

“It pains me to know that some of my students do not feel welcomed. That is my work ahead.”

“The individual interactions between students and faculty, and students and staff have to reflect our shared commitment to eliminating racism. Each employee needs opportunity for professional development around implicit bias, prejudice, and racism to understand their own perspective and that of others.”

Figure 1. How Does Racism Show Up on Campus?



Note: Data coded from open-ended responses. The array of manifestations stated total more than 41 because most respondents identified multiple examples.

The movement for a curricular requirement in ethnic studies represents both an acknowledgement of racism and historical oppression and a broader recognition that race and culture matter, and should therefore be part of the educational core. More generally, the need for curricula and pedagogy that are culturally relevant and culturally sustaining across all fields of study, not just Ethnic Studies, has been well established in the education literature.³ Culturally relevant pedagogy is an approach that includes and affirms students' cultural backgrounds, interests and lived experiences in course content and teaching.

Beyond the aforementioned manifestations of racism, several CEOs described a neglect of Black students (and in a few cases other students of color) and a lack of intentional care for addressing racial inequalities as the culprit: "Simply by not talking about race as it pertains to student access, support programs, and success." Another noted an active resistance and "push back" when race is raised, citing the notion, "haven't we already done equity?" Or, as another CEO reflected, "There are some faculty and students who are offended and disagree with me openly taking a strong stance against racism." A number of CEOs connected this broader neglect to the "silence of White people," or a "refusal to own their racism and denial of white⁴ privilege," and to "unconscious bias."

How Racism and Bias Affect CEOs Personally

We also asked CEOs in what ways they had been a target of racism and/or implicit bias in their role as a campus or district leader. Six of the 41 respondents indicated they had not experienced racism or bias directed to them (an additional 3 did not respond to this question). Yet, among the remaining 32 respondents, more than half (17) reported experiencing direct acts of racism while in the leadership position, revealing that the higher education setting is far from immune to the everyday realities of racism experienced by people of color, and by Black people in particular. CEOs reported being stopped by police because they were "new to the area," being accused of being

"Microaggressions are a daily thing. I've had people 'touch' my hair to see how soft it was! Disgusting. And this was done in a professional setting. There is not enough room on this form for me to share my experiences. Actually, I am exhausted!"

"too educated," receiving anonymous letters and racist language, being subject to verbal attacks such as "go back to where you came from," and other examples of hostile work encounters. This CEO offered: "Yes, every day of my career. I am not an alarmist. It's just the reality of what it is like to be a decision maker from a complexion which folks think is substandard. While I recognize, to many, it's not intentional in any way, this is how it is. It is an eternal knee in your neck."

Numerous CEOs described the various ways they've confronted a larger set of assumptions of what a college president should look like. "As a president of color myself, it happens too frequently. Things like 'Oh, you are the president? Like the president, president of the whole college?'" CEOs of color offered reflections on how they've been impacted by these experiences in responses that suggest fatigue, but also great resilience and sophisticated coping mechanisms, in the face of encounters that could well wear them down. "As a president of color, it's difficult not to become desensitized to many implicit and explicit acts of racism that you face given the frequency [with] which it occurs. Therefore, you are forced to ignore these incidents not to become paralyzed by the weight of it that would make it impossible to be effective in your role as CEO. I know that I have been denied positions because of my race, and I have had to prove my competencies in ways in which my white colleagues are not required to do."

A significant number of the self-identified women CEOs (9), irrespective of their race, reported experiencing gender bias in their CEO or prior roles: "As a female CBO, I was treated like I didn't know anything about money, construction and facilities." Other respondents who voluntarily disclosed being both female and of color noted the compounded nature of bias they experienced, which one of them described as "a very painful experience... at times, traumatic." She wrote: "Despite meeting all of the traditional professional and educational requirements for the position, there is presumption of incompetence and continued questioning of decision-making that is not exercised with white male counterparts." One CEO noted a lack of

"I am a woman of color and people sometimes make assumptions about me based on that. Truth be told, I have gotten used to that and work through it. Overall my experiences have been good and my gender and ethnicity have not held me back. In fact, I see them as assets that define and strengthen my leadership."

acceptance due to sexual orientation. In a number of instances, responses about race and gender identity overlapped, and the complexity of intersectional identity was evident.

Barriers to Change

We asked CEOs directly about what they believed were the biggest impediments to addressing racism on their campus or in their district. A small but notable group of respondents (7) expressed that barriers did not exist, indicating strong district office support or a sense of personal agency around leading necessary action. “There are no impediments,” one offered. “You have to have the will and the guts to take on ‘the establishment.’” Wrote another: “There is strong interest in addressing racism right now.”

Most CEOs, however, described significant barriers to rooting out racism and bias that ranged from attitudinal (“hearts and minds”) to structural (“harm through the bureaucracy”). Half of respondents noted the need for cultural competency training or other targeted professional development for faculty and staff. Within that group, a substantial number lamented a lack of bias awareness and of “equity mindedness”—a race- and historically-conscious practitioner perspective that institutions and the people who work in them own responsibility for student success. Several CEOs specifically cited the need for training to “help faculty understand the role they play in reaching the Black students with as much care and concern as they show other students in their classes.” A few mentioned difficulty “negotiating the politics of discussing race and equity,” or “discomfort or inability to discuss race and equity in a constructive way.”

Roughly a third of CEOs cited the basic need for stronger “will” or leadership responsibility on the part of themselves, their trustees or other high level administrators, and some cited the need for a specific call to action or campus plan to actively address racism and equity concerns. Five CEOs made specific mention of governing boards as lacking “expertise to lead and craft policy on racial equity,” suggesting added pressure on CEOs in such districts to lead at this racial inflection point for higher education. “The issue of preparedness of governing boards has to be addressed,” said one CEO who described a board of trustees of very different makeup than the student body.

“I am very fortunate to be at a college that is taking on the difficult discussions of race.”

“When it comes to addressing racism, bias, and White privilege, in a place where many people do not even acknowledge it exists, I need to be strategic. It will require patience, empathy, understanding, and education to get through the first step—admitting we have a problem.”

A third of respondents noted that staff and faculty at their institutions are uncomfortable with conversations about race and racism—“denial that institutional/structural racism exists,” or that there were pockets of resistance to the notion that Black people face particular bias or hostility. A few cited the difficulty of sustaining focus on anti-blackness at institutions where the leadership team or the student body is primarily White or Latinx. For example: “Focusing on anti-Blackness has been difficult for many, including others in positions of leadership who are non-white.”

Constraints and Risks

Several CEOs expressed a pragmatic understanding of the limits of their power and influence to lead transformation of the culture on their campuses. Many described structural constraints, for example in hiring; others noted a number of elements of the community college structure—governance and finance, for instance—within which CEOs must lead and manage. Some CEOs achieve enough longevity and relational and political capital to influence those structures, but few can control them.

“Many people want to tackle ‘practices’... And yes, this is true, we must tackle these areas to tackle racism in our colleges. But, even more important than that, I think we really need to focus more so on ‘practitioners’. We must work with and on the hearts and minds of all of our practitioners who ultimately make the decisions that impact the practices and environments in which we work.”

“The current model, which allows minimal eligibility/skill requirements for trustees, that inherently have a political agenda, to direct a CEO who possesses the requisite skills to lead and operate a multi-million dollar enterprise is riddled with contradictions. It frequently impedes the ability of the college to make effective and transformative institutional change.”

One CEO described this significant tension this way:

“At a certain point, there need to be some challenging questions that may upset the structure—leading to the possibility that the system may not be able to reform itself. How do you address with the unions the problem with re-employment rights for part-time faculty? How do you address making equity data for all faculty more public? How do you address campus police funding structure, and whether they even need to exist in the form that they do on our campus? How do you tell the Academic Senate (mostly White representing mostly White faculty) that their control of curriculum could be problematic, for instance? How a mostly White faculty group treats a mostly racially diverse classified group or even administrators (including CEOs) of color? How do you tell White faculty that the reason why students don’t feel connected with them is because of their race and how whiteness shows up? Shall I stop, for now?”

CEO responses also suggest there are potential professional risks associated in making changes to address institutional racism. There is often little to no incentive for CEOs to challenge the status quo as many of these efforts can be viewed as unnecessary, disruptive and likely to generate resistance among campus faculty and staff. “No president/superintendent/chancellor really wants to take on the fight,” wrote one CEO. “It will take courage and fortitude to make it happen.”

Others, particularly CEOs of color, highlighted the risks inherent in simply “being oneself.” I am tired of “code-switching”, said one, “making others comfortable for fear of losing my job, working longer hours to show others that I can stand beside them although I have credentials that equal or exceed theirs. ENOUGH!” Yet another, who self-identified as White, noted a different kind of challenge for his or her leadership in recent days: “It has opened my eyes to my own white fragility and helped me to reprioritize my efforts and to communicate differently. I was prepared to resign as president last week if I experienced lack of support to move forward with a renewed focus on equity and inclusion. Fortunately, I got the support and will forge forward.”

Competency in Leading for Racial Equity

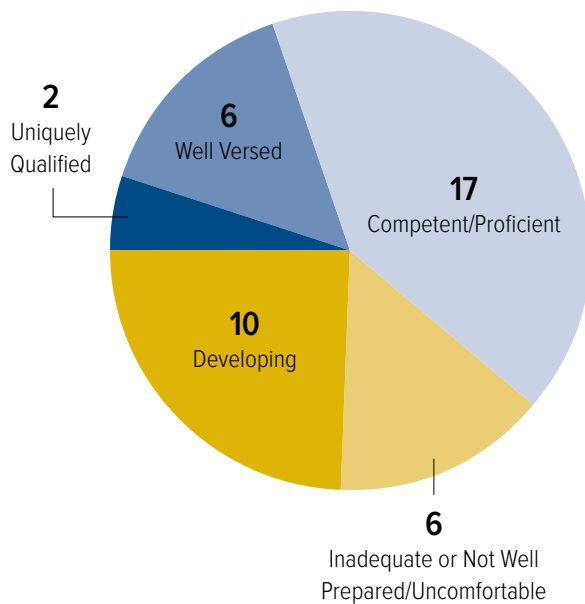
Respondents’ enumeration of challenges and structural impediments underscore the high level of skill and persistence required to tackle them. We asked CEOs to assess their own expertise in leading conversations and campus efforts racial equity. On a continuum ranging from basic, developing, competent, proficient to expert, respondents’ perceptions of their own competency ranged broadly (Figure 2). We preface these findings by acknowledging that CEOs may both overestimate and underestimate their own capacity. Nevertheless, self perceptions of abilities offer an important window on how CEOs may approach leadership to address critical issues of racism, as well as the types of support they seek to do so effectively.

A small but significant number of CEOs (6 among the 41 respondents) described their skills as “inadequate,” citing discomfort with being able to lead discussions about race. One CEO who self-placed in this category wrote, for example, “it has been uncomfortable.” Another admitted: “[I’m] not well prepared... I have been seeking guidance.”

Twice as many (12) described their expertise as a work in progress. “I would assess my own experience as a CEO in leading conversations on racial equity as developing. I have sought guidance and mentorship, but if I’m being honest, I could and should do a lot more.” Another put it this way: “I do not consider myself highly proficient at conversations involving race. The subject is probably too fraught for me to completely trust my

“Are we willing to revamp the curriculum? Are we willing to diversify our adjunct pools and hire colleagues from those pools? Will we restructure the institution to meet the diverse needs of our communities or will we continue to require them to assimilate to what we think is best based on a system that was not designed for the new demographic?”

Figure 2. CEOs' Perceptions of Their Competency in Leading for Racial Equity



ability to keep my composure and be completely honest, so I definitely enlist the support of trusted colleagues for especially sensitive discussions.”

The largest group (more than a third of all respondents) described their expertise as competent or proficient. Some described this proficiency based on their academic background or teaching experience; others attributed proficiency to years of experience in leadership roles. Yet, nearly all mentioned the nuance and complexity of conversations about race. For example, one CEO stated that “while I have a competent understanding of racial equity, I am less confident in my ability to lead campus-wide anti-racism efforts, particularly how to handle resistance and conflict around this subject.” This sensibility was echoed by others who described their expertise on the topic as competent but their leadership efforts as more tentative.

Finally, an additional group described themselves as “well-versed” or “expert” in leading conversations about race.

“I have been doing anti-racist work, multicultural education work, and diversity, equity and inclusion work in hiring for over 24 years,” wrote one CEO, “so I consider myself well-versed to lead conversations and implement programming on racial equity.” Some described prior leadership roles directly addressing issues of racial equity, making them “uniquely qualified to address issues of race, equity and racism.” This notion of being uniquely qualified was often tied to a CEO’s self-described lived experience as a person of color.

Although we did not ask CEOs to disclose their race, a significant number volunteered it, including White CEOs who spoke very specifically about how their own identity intersects with this work: “I am a white female and [aware of] what that brings to a conversation on race.” Another wrote: “As a white woman...during this current climate, I have taken a back seat to allow our black and brown leaders to advise me, instead of the other way around. It is extremely difficult to stay vulnerable, to act with thought rather than because I need to ‘do something’ and to take the criticism that inevitably comes my way... I honestly just need to listen and learn, rather than talk or defend. I have relied heavily on those who can advise and provide guidance, as well as talking to other CEO counterparts for counsel.”

The Strength and Complexity of Lived Experience as a Competency

For leaders of color, this time of racial reckoning is also filled with deep contradictions. A number of those surveyed have ascended to their leadership roles feeling like they had to “check their own identity at the door,” or at least “downplay” it. One described the feeling of needing to “conjure it back up” now that conversations about anti-blackness and racism have come urgently to the fore. A number of respondents of color expressed that their lived experience brought a new sense of authenticity and value to their leadership in this context.

Yet, this very idea of lived experience as a competency also poses a tension—if not a threat—among those less skilled. Such vulnerabilities were evident among many of the self-identified White CEOs who articulated discomfort. And, for CEOs of color, this expertise has also counted against them at times.

“...as a white progressive, I thought I understood the problem of racism, but the last few weeks make me realize I can’t fully understand what it is like to be black in this country. So it starts with a re-education of our own American history, and if we can’t coalesce around this concept across all educational segments, we cannot create the change that must happen in our country.”

“I have sought guidance and mentorship, but if I’m being honest, I could and should do a lot more.”

One described the difficulties in navigating a conservative community surrounding the college, “while not abandoning my values or sense of identity; overcompensating to demonstrate my worth and competencies beyond my multiple identities.” Another noted that “a major problem tends to be the use of a double standard for people of color, and Black people have multiple standards they must meet to pass the tests placed before them.”

What does it mean to now “lean in” to these challenging conversations when for much of one’s career, identity needed to be downplayed or put aside? One CEO articulated that “you become desensitized in order to get in these roles.” For many leaders of color, the idea of leading on racial issues has been fraught. Some described the need to downplay issues of race so as not to be perceived as singularly focused on equity at the expense of bread-and-butter management, human resources, or financial matters. The idea that institutional racism is now viewed in conjunction with other aspects of the organization is not new to many leaders, but the tension of raising it when one is a leader of color is a burden not shared by other CEOs. In other words, when White CEOs wave the flag of equity it can be considered exceptional and value-added. When CEOs of color wave the same flag it is often dismissed as expected, or even self-interested. One CEO recounted the multiple times hiring committees “will avoid sending me faculty finalists of color for fear that I will only hire for diversity.”

Leaders of color are particularly equipped to lead on these issues at this time, but the path to the CEO position often places little or no value to the competency of such lived experiences. As one put it: “Cultural competency and racial fluency should be evaluated just as enrollment management.” In typical job descriptions for community college CEOs, the criteria often focus exclusively on technical competencies, such as accreditation, budget and financing, enrollment management, information technology, and human resources. Cultural competency and racial fluency are seen and evaluated as desirable interpersonal attributes, but not as technical competencies valued enough to be required for college leadership. Competency assessments for CEOs rarely attribute any value to the unique expertise derived from lived experience or to a professional record of leading efforts for racial justice.

At the same time, those who lead and work in the system need to remain vigilant against stereotyping or assumptions about capacity based solely on race. CEOs of color may be expected to be experts on issues of race and racism because of perceived, but not actual, lived experience. And White CEOs may be perceived to be novices in this space because of their perceived privilege. Both can be untrue.

Seeking Guidance and Support to Build Competency

Importantly, nearly all CEOs indicated a desire to seek guidance and/or mentorship in this space, citing a desire to seek out professional development opportunities, engage with specified programs—A2MEND, Umoja, Colegas—and CEO workshops to hone their abilities to manage difficult conversations. This desire for additional guidance was communicated even by veteran CEOs: “While I have my lived experience to inform my perspective and approach to having conversations about race, I am seeking guidance. I have lived many years and the dynamics around race-related conversations have not changed much in some ways, which is disheartening. However, at the same time there are new voices ... engaged in the conversations. I am intrigued by this and encouraged that things might have a better chance of improving more systemically than when earlier protests for racial equity were launched.”

Fourteen CEOs said they were seeking external support: “It is best to utilize an external, well-established expert, who is not connected with this district, to help guide the conversation.” Seven respondents listed their reliance on their peers for advice about navigating this space. Others described relying on faculty with particular expertise, for example, in matters of White privilege, and inviting speakers and forums to raise awareness. To underscore the need for outside expertise, several CEOs mentioned joining the California Community College Race and Equity Center Leadership Alliance, established by the Equity Center at the University of Southern California to address institutional racism and bias by providing professional learning for campus teams, a resource portal and campus climate surveys. Other CEOs acknowledged the utility of outside expertise, but noted the importance of not relying on it over the building of internal capacity, of “owning” the work such that not all guidance on sensitive issues is contracted out.

“As a crusader in this field for over 40 years, this is my last chance to influence and make a difference for lasting, transformational change in my lifetime. I do not want this opportunity to be squandered.”

“It has provided an opportunity for me to step up and engage faculty, staff, and students in the conversation. It’s given me the courage to say things I should have been saying at my institution for some time.”

Momentum for Action

With invigorated dialogues taking place at local, state and national levels, half of all CEOs who responded to the survey said they sensed a fresh opportunity to tackle racism and equity issues at their institutions. “I am leveraging this momentum and responding with urgency,” wrote one. Others said they “will not let this opportunity go” or felt the need “to strike while the iron is hot.”

They have strong support from California Community Colleges Chancellor Eloy Ortiz Oakley, who issued a six-point Call to Action and said on June 3:

“We have contributed to the problem. I know that’s difficult for some of us to hear. We all come to our job wanting to help our students... Wanting to do the right thing. But our system of higher education is filled with systemic barriers that make this problem what it is today. We have to accept that. We have to accept not only the responsibility and accountability of the system but our own individual responsibility as well.”

A number of survey respondents cited specific action plans or new goals (“more than talk”) that were an outgrowth of a new and heightened sensibility. Several wrote that they would be tying race and equity issues into strategic planning or professional development initiatives. Others mentioned establishment of a new campus center devoted to racial justice; new institutional frameworks on racial justice; convening of special teams or working groups; new orientation modules for onboarding employees; college-wide, data-informed discussions examining student success and equity gaps; and close reviews of campus policing policies. Most had issued statements of solidarity with Black students, faculty and staff in the wake of George Floyd’s murder, and had convened remote town halls, listening sessions and healing circles. Notably, only one CEO volunteered that state-required student equity plans were a vehicle for action.

Urgency, Hope and “Good Trouble”

The work ahead is hard and requires resolve, resilience, expertise and sustained institutional commitment. This much is clear from both the survey responses and observation of the broader context. The respondents to this survey delivered candor about how racism and bias are experienced and the deep wounds felt across campus communities, and for Black community members in particular. Responses also surfaced humility about leadership capacity and structural barriers as CEOs push to help their institutions evolve to be teaching and learning environments where all students, faculty and staff feel seen, heard, respected and successful.

What was also striking about the survey responses was that—despite risks, fatigue, structural obstacles and a self-professed need for support—so many CEOs welcomed the urgency and embraced the imperative to attack racism and bias, and the role that community colleges can play in shaping society. “While challenging,” one reflected, “this is a transformative opportunity for the district to re-imagine who we are, how we serve and develop creative and courageous internal and external strategies.”

There were strong doses of hope and determination, even from the same CEOs who identified tall challenges. “Not since Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr.,” said one CEO, “have I believed our society was this ripe for the transformational change needed to close equity gaps and restructure systems for justice less influenced by white power and white privilege... We must learn from past mistakes. We cannot stop short of the goal.”

In a season marked by a global pandemic and increased attention to the senseless loss of Black lives to police brutality,

“I am very hopeful. For the first time we are truly talking about race and our black employees, especially, are being more vocal about the indignities they suffer in their lives, and even at the campus. It’s been very raw, which has shocked a lot of people and it is creating momentum for change.”

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we can hear in many survey responses the echoes of what the late civil rights legend John Lewis referred to as the need for “good trouble, necessary trouble” to confront racism and bias. CEOs’ testimonials reveal a general understanding that, as difficult as it may be, they carry an individual and collective responsibility to both serve their institutions and, at the same time, to challenge them. If they are successful, the California Community Colleges have perhaps the best opportunity to eradicate educational inequities and overcome social and racial injustice. They are the institutions perhaps best positioned to empower Californians, at scale, in pursuit of education and the economic security that comes with it.

Many have remarked that the current national uprising for racial equity and social justice recalls the civil rights movement of three generations past, when Dr. King led the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He said then: “We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now... there ‘is’ such a thing as being too late. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action.” For leaders of the community colleges, those words echo today.

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Endnotes

¹ “Left Out: How Exclusion in California’s Colleges and Universities Hurts Our Values, Our Students, and Our Economy.” Campaign for College Opportunity, 2018.

² See Llamas, J.D., Nguyen, K. & Tran, A.G.T.T. (2019). “The case for greater faculty diversity: Examining the educational impacts of student-faculty racial/ethnic match.” *Race Ethnicity and Education*, DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2019.1679759

³ As defined by Paris and Alim, “[c]ulturally sustaining pedagogy exists wherever education sustains the lifeways of communities who have been and continue to be damaged and erased through schooling.” *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*. Edited By: Django Paris, H. Samy Alim, 2017. Teachers College Press.

⁴ Wheelhouse editorial practice is to capitalize race descriptors. For all direct quotes from survey respondents, however, we maintained the original capitalization or lower-case letters as they originally appeared in the written responses.