Promising Practices and Barriers for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion among Students, Staff, and Faculty

Findings based on Interviews and Focus Groups among Sample North Carolina Community Colleges

Submitted June 30, 2021, to Committee for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
Summary

ASA Research conducted a total of 51 interviews and focus groups with a diverse and representative sample of students, staff, faculty, and administrators at 12 North Carolina community colleges. The objective of this research was to learn about institutional policies and practices that either facilitate or hinder diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for students, faculty, and staff, in particular among Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and under-served Asian and Pacific Islander populations. The majority of participants report diverse and inclusive campus climates; however, colleges are mixed in their level of DEI efforts, awareness, and progress. Many of the colleges have recently implemented DEI committees and DEI strategic goals as part of their 2020 strategic planning, and several are beginning to look at disaggregated student outcomes to identify barriers for historically underserved students of color.

The most commonly cited topic in response to questions about DEI, barriers, and promising practices was the lack of staff and faculty who share backgrounds or characteristics similar to students. This issue was cited a total of 70 times, far more than any other topic (see Figure 1; Note: The size of the response text corresponds to the number of times cited during focus group conversations). The importance of hiring faculty and staff to whom students can relate was emphasized by students, staff, faculty, and administrators at all 12 colleges.

Figure 1. Commonly Cited Themes/Topics
Below are major themes identified; note that many participants referred to barriers as being more related to low-income/first-generation characteristics than race/ethnicity, and spoke to related practice rather than policy.

**Findings: Common Themes**

The following findings summarize frequently occurring themes or responses cited by interview and focus group participants. The figures represent the number of times a topic was raised by a participant in response to an open-ended question.

**DEI Efforts**

When asked about DEI-related initiatives, the most commonly cited were recent strategic plans that incorporate DEI goals, and recently formed DEI committees (Figure 2). Roughly the same number of participants, however, said their campuses do not have any DEI-specific goals or policies. It seems that the bulk of current DEI efforts were initiated in 2020.

**Figure 2. DEI Efforts**

- Strategic plan: 20
- No specific DEI policies/goals: 20
- DEI committee: 19
- Strategic DEI goals: 18
- DEI training: 18
- DEI priority: 12
- DEI consultant: 11

**DEI Training**

Several staff at campuses that do offer DEI training noted it as having limited availability. DEI training is typically not mandatory, and a potential problem is that staff who need DEI training the most do not believe it is a concern or think they need the training. For this reason, it may be
worth considering making DEI training mandatory. Participants shared that DEI training is also important to help instructors understand the struggles that students of color experience, many of whom are low-income and may face barriers such as childcare or transportation, so they can make reasonable accommodations.

**DEI Needs**

The most commonly cited need for increasing equitable outcomes and inclusive climates at North Carolina community colleges is to hire more representative faculty and staff. We repeatedly heard from students and staff across all 12 colleges that having faculty and senior administrators in leadership positions who share demographic and background characteristics with students is essential to inclusion and success. However, most colleges are facing challenges hiring more diverse staff and faculty and are in need of effective approaches.

Additional needs included increased student support, advising, community outreach, and disaggregated data. While student support and specifically, academic support such as tutoring were cited as effective for historically underserved students (see Promising Practices), even more common is the need for additional student support (Figure 3).

Colleges cited a need to more effectively connect with prospective students in underserved communities. One college noted its marketing materials portray only White students, faculty and staff, which makes it difficult to recruit more diverse students; another cited a need to offer promotional materials in Spanish and other common languages in the local community.

**Figure 3. College DEI Needs**
**Staff/Faculty Representation**

Below are some examples of feedback from interview and focus group participants articulating both the need for and challenges to increasing diversity of faculty and staff:

- “Students feel disconnected from faculty and staff who are primarily female and White.”
- “Students of color do not see a lot of people like them on campus.”
- “The college needs more staff and faculty that reflect students, but they are lacking resources. There is only one recruiter.”
- “Faculty of color face a higher emotional burden of supporting students of color who do not feel comfortable reaching out to White faculty.”
- One college is “working on changing staff requirements” to hire more staff of color to better mirror the students. Another is “loosening requirements,” such as the level of education or number of years of experience.
- At one college, only 1 of 11 members of the Executive Leadership Team is a staff of color.
- One college with a growing Latino community added “prefer bilingual” to all job descriptions.

**Support/Advising Needs**

Overall, both professional and faculty advising were praised by staff and students alike. However, the following feedback was also provided:

- Some students have not received any information about articulation agreements or transferability of courses. It seems this should be made available before they initially enroll. It may be that students are expected to be proactive, but first-generation students in particular do not necessarily know to ask about this.

- One college mentioned students are encouraged and even pushed to enroll full-time and take up to 15 credits so they can finish their program in two years. However, personal situations should be taken into account as this is unrealistic for students who work or have family responsibilities.

- A few participants mentioned that females of color in particular enroll in low paying fields, and that better advising and career coaching is needed to help direct them into higher mobility fields.
• At one college, students need two advisor approvals each semester, for 1) plans and 2) approval before registering. This can be an obstacle when advisors are not responsive.

• On the other hand, some colleges have a self-registration where students without college-going backgrounds may end up accumulating credits without obtaining credentials.

• Students often lack academic preparation to be successful at the college level, especially students of color and first-generation students, due to lack of high school rigor. These students may be aware of academic support services such as tutoring but do not always seek it out. This points to the need for intentional and intrusive academic support.

Campus Climate

Figure 4 displays participants’ responses to open-ended questions about their perceptions of campus climates. Participants were twice as likely to describe their campus climate as being inclusive (26) compared with non-inclusive (13), regardless of race/ethnicity. For the most part, participants appear satisfied with their campus diversity and inclusivity and often stated, “everyone is treated the same,” or they “value everyone.” Several participants, however, while initially hesitant to share, eventually revealed their campuses “could be more inclusive.”

While students and staff may feel their campuses are inclusive and welcoming environments, this does not necessarily mean that DEI is a topic that staff or faculty feel comfortable discussing – the lack of awareness of DEI-related challenges and/or lack of DEI-related discussions on campuses was cited 27 times.

Figure 4. Campus Climate

| Lack of awareness and/or discussions about DEI | 27 |
| Inclusive | 26 |
| Faculty/Staff Engagement | 21 |
| Student diversity | 20 |
| Non-inclusive | 13 |
| Student engagement | 8 |
| Discrimination | 4 |
\textbf{Social Justice Response}

While leaders at four of the colleges released statements and/or held campus dialogues to address the killing of George Floyd and calls for social justice, the majority of college leaders did not release any statements. A few students and staff of color shared they wished the colleges had shown their support, but most participants were uncomfortable discussing these decisions. Some participants noted this decision was driven by the local culture, and that making a statement in support of social justice would be considered political or controversial. One college’s students noted being located in a politically conservative area where “you have to be careful what you say.”

This lack of response seems to reflect a general discomfort discussing race or DEI, and the need for increased DEI awareness and training. It seems that not acknowledging recent events and the social justice movement might alienate some Black students in particular.

\textbf{Inclusive Climates}

Several participants pointed to their campuses as having inclusive climates or cultures. They feel the student bodies represent the demographic composition of the surrounding community, and that all are accepted and made to feel a part of the campus. One campus noted holding cultural events such as Diwali and Hispanic heritage month celebrations. The college promotes diversity and inclusiveness through “safe zone” stickers and posters throughout campus. Another college’s SGA held a mock court case about racism to help students evaluate their implicit biases.

Several described their campuses – particularly the smaller colleges – as having “family” atmospheres. As one student stated:

\begin{quote}
\textit{“Everyone has equal opportunity; your background doesn’t matter because we are a school of nontraditional students...pretty much everyone here seems to be accepting no matter your background or where you come from. ...One instructor spent the first class talking about lack of tolerance for racial discrimination...I have not come across any judgments or exclusions.”}
\end{quote}

As one administrator emphasized, policy is only one part of ensuring inclusion:

\begin{quote}
\textit{“There is a two-pronged attack to this. Policy changes or modifications is one path, and then changing the mindset of those involved is another path. You can have all the policy in the world that may guide things procedurally but ultimately decisions}
\end{quote}
are made by human beings and these human beings come with preconceived notions that impact the decisions they make and how they engage with people. What we have been engaging in is trying to change the culture of the institution...trying to get people to think about how to engage with minoritized students.”

**Non-inclusive Climates**

While several students and staff members expressed satisfaction with student diversity and inclusion, others expressed concern:

- One student described feeling like an outsider as the only person of color in her class.
- A staff of color heading a newly formed DEI committee finds it “challenging” because white staff/faculty “don’t recognize disparities” – they need more awareness of DEI challenges, and “have to get uncomfortable.” The college does not have any student activities or events to celebrate culture or diversity. When she tried in the past to organize diversity activities, she was told it would be uncomfortable for the community.
- One college noted a racist demonstration on campus involving a confederate flag, and students pushing back on assignments related to DEI.
- Another college noted that racism is not overt but can be expressed "in a coded language."

Several colleges have made recent progress on DEI efforts, having formed DEI committees or incorporated DEI into strategic goals in the last few months. However, while campuses have made progress, changing the culture takes time.

**Barriers**

Figure 5 displays the factors cited as barriers to student success. Internet was the most commonly cited barrier by staff and students alike, due to the rural setting of many colleges and lack of broadband access, and college applications having recently moved online. This was a particularly prominent challenge during the pandemic when classes moved online, however the majority of colleges provided computer and internet access through CARES funding.

Additional barriers cited were financial and application challenges, followed by FAFSA and language, or the need to translate documents and/or hire bilingual staff, typically for Spanish-speaking students. Several staff and students alike stated the application process is “cumbersome,” overly complex, and could be “streamlined” more. Several shared the documentation can be time consuming, particularly for low-income students, and the
application process could be simplified by eliminating some requests they felt were unnecessary, such as a driver's license.

Participants expressed a need to increase FAFSA awareness, particularly among students of color. There is also a need to increase student awareness of financial aid resources, including state emergency and CARES funding. Scholarships for minority students often go unawarded, because students are either unaware of them or do not believe they are eligible.

**Figure 5. Barriers to Student Success**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barrier</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Application</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAFSA</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students of color-specific</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-generation</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online coursework</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black-specific</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scheduling</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DEI-Related Policies**

Although asked about policies that either help or hinder DEI, participants for the most part preferred to speak about practice. The institutional policies that were cited are found in figure 6. Human Resource (HR) policies cited were typically Equal Opportunity Employer policies and efforts to recruit more diverse staff (see staff/faculty representation, above). Other institutional policies are described below.

**Graduation Application**

Although some are working to remove this requirement, at many colleges, a graduation application is required to graduate and/or participate in commencement. However, students are often unaware of this requirement. At one college, a student who is otherwise highly engaged
and active at the institution did not receive an email or other notification, and information about the graduation application was difficult to locate on the website.

**Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) Policy**

SAP disproportionately affected students of color, especially during the pandemic. One college changed its policy to keep students from being dropped if they missed 25% of class by giving them credit if an assignment is done. This is especially helpful for students of color who have families and/or need to work. Another college changed its withdrawal policy to eliminate the “WF” mark so that students receive the grade they earned from a class rather than fail if they withdraw after completing 90% of the course.

Policies that fell into the “other” category included name changes, program criteria, credit expiration, professional appearance requirements for students in workforce programs, payment plans, and timing of Gateway course completion.

*Figure 6. Institutional DEI-Related Policies (either levers or barriers)*

**State Policies**

State policies were cited more frequently than institutional policies. Specifically, RDS and restrictions on undocumented and DACA students were widely cited as detrimental to historically underserved students, including students of color, first-generation, and low-income students. Undocumented/DACA students are not only ineligible for in-state tuition – even those students who graduated from a local high school – but also for state certifications.
Additionally, undocumented students with a GED are ineligible to enroll, although institutions are addressing these restrictions differently. At some colleges, their website clearly states, "Undocumented immigrants with a General Educational Development (GED®) Diploma are not considered to be graduated from a United States public high school, private high school, or home school" and therefore are not eligible to be admitted. Other colleges have made an institutional practice of avoiding asking students to disclose status or strongly encouraging undocumented students to enroll in Adult High School programs, instead of GED. But this strongly depends on the college and their interpretation of policy, and institutional practice that avoids asking students to disclose status.

**RISE**

RISE was primarily cited favorably as increasing access to college-level coursework for underserved students of color. One participant expressed concern that students are enrolled in 8 hours of math including the co-requisite. Another is concerned that RISE does not prepare students for college-level coursework. Perhaps, as one participant suggested, a rigorous evaluation is needed to determine the effectiveness of RISE.

**Registration holds/past due balances**

The state policy of not allowing students with past due balances to register negatively impacts students of color. One college is trying to find loans to pay off these balances and advocating for the state to change this policy. The scope of this problem can be large; one college that has looked closely at the data found that more than 5,000 students have past due balances in their accounts. A disproportionate amount of past due accounts is held by students of color and Black students in particular, who are often also low-income. Half of students with past due balances owe less than $50, some as low as 30 cents. The college would like to have approval of the state to pay off certain past due balances but is legally prevented from doing so. These policies also keep students from transferring, obtaining jobs that require transcripts, and taking professional development courses required by employers.

**Finish Line/First**

Both the statewide Finish Line grant and Wake Tech’s Finish First tool were mentioned as effective ways to increase completion for underserved students.
**Promising Practices**

When asked about promising practices for historically underserved students of color along the college pathway (from access to completion), the most common responses related to academic advising, institutional financial supports, the Minority Male grant and other minority programming, effective leadership invested in DEI efforts, outreach into the community to recruit students and assist them with applications, disaggregating student outcome data, and workforce training programs.

Within advising, early alert systems seem to be particularly effective at keeping students on track and providing needed, timely, intrusive support through enhanced communication that allows through ease of access to shared information. In addition to academic support, early alert systems can notify staff about personal or financial challenges that require referrals for additional support.

The Aviso early alert system was implemented along with student success coaches as part of the statewide Minority Male initiative. While seen as effective, most colleges do not have the funding needed to continue staffing or expand this program.
Financial Resources

While financial barriers are common among students, particularly those from low-SES backgrounds, many of whom are students of color, several participants cited the financial resources their colleges offer to help students overcome these challenges. Many staff cited their colleges’ foundations which provide scholarships and other general support. Common areas of direct funding for student resources include computers and internet, and basic needs such as food pantries.

Figure 9. Institutional Financial Resources/Supports
Innovative Practices

While not frequently cited, the following new and innovative practices show promise for helping historically underserved students overcome common barriers:

- At one college, the office of financial aid has been hiring bilingual students to help students and their families apply for financial aid. They are considering hiring bilingual staff more permanently, as this is a valuable resource for connecting with Hispanic students and their families.

- One college has held FAFSA drive-ins to address students’ need for internet and computers.

- 4 colleges indicated undergoing new initiatives to diversify their curriculum or train faculty in culturally responsive teaching frameworks. The colleges are diversifying curricula through the addition of courses such as African American studies and early childhood social diversity, the incorporation of DEI topics into existing coursework, and the review of course syllabi to assess inclusiveness in the learning environment.

- One college is training its faculty through a new center to incorporate evidence-based practices including equity-minded teaching and learning. Part of this is “understanding who is achieving or falling behind” and better understanding the lived experiences of students. Another college has an initiative on “Becoming 21st Century Faculty” and better connecting with students.

These newly developed initiatives are currently being implemented and are worth tracking for staff, student, and institutional-level outcomes. At the same time, students had positive feedback about well-established support programs for historically underserved students such as TRIO. Students who joined honors societies seemed particularly engaged with the institution and have access to supports that would benefit all historically underserved students of color, not only those who are high performers.

Conclusion

North Carolina community colleges are making progress towards increased diversity, equity, and inclusion through initiatives that tackle inequitable access and success and bring to light the barriers facing historically underserved students of color. Many institutional stakeholders describe diverse, inclusive environments, while others are hesitant to speak about topics such as race or diversity. Changing the culture or climate of a college takes time and is ultimately driven by the leadership. Engaging staff and faculty in DEI trainings and committees, and including
students in DEI discussions are important steps in making that shift towards an equity mindset. It is clear from this campus-based research that effective hiring practices for increasing the diversity of faculty and staff should be the number one priority for increasing inclusivity and student success. North Carolina community colleges have invested resources to support students academically, personally, and financially, and such efforts should be continued or expanded. The JFF Guidebook and Inventory provide additional guidelines and resources to help North Carolina community college leaders take the charge in serving as models for DEI innovation and success.

Endnotes

1 See Section 1D SBCCC 400.2. b.1, Memorandum CC10-026, effective July 12, 2010.