

Culturally Sustaining Professional Development for Community College Faculty and Staff

REACH Guidebook Series

About the REACH Guidebook Series

The REACH Guidebook Series builds upon insights from Lumina Foundation's Racial Equity in Adult Credentialing in Higher Education (REACH) initiative, a multi-year effort involving six states – California, Colorado, North Carolina, New York, Texas, and Virginia – to strengthen credential attainment for adult learners of color in community colleges.



This three-part series was developed to offer practical insights into how faculty, staff, and administrators at the community college can leverage resources to design and implement innovative strategies to positively affect academic and workforce-related outcomes for racially minoritized adult students. Each guidebook focuses on a key area of practice relevant for advancing equitable outcomes among adult learners of color:

- **Framework for Advancing Equitable Credit for Prior Learning**
- **Culturally Sustaining Professional Development for Community College Faculty and Staff**
- **Outreach and Engagement for Racially Minoritized Adults at the Community College**

Grounded in current research, practitioner experience, and insights gathered from interviews and cohort meetings with REACH and REACH Deeper colleges, the series offers practical guidance, actionable tools, and real-world examples to help institutions strengthen their efforts to better serve adult learners of color.

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Culturally Sustaining Professional Development for Community College Faculty and Staff



Introduction

This guidebook is a practical, comprehensive resource for community college faculty and staff seeking to embed culturally relevant and sustaining practices into their day-to-day work with students—particularly adult learners of color. As the nation’s community colleges become increasingly racially, culturally, and generationally diverse, the practices and mindsets that faculty and staff bring to teaching, advising, and student support must evolve accordingly. In today’s sociopolitical climate, marked by rising anti-DEI sentiment, it is more important than ever to provide inclusive, equity-minded professional development (PD) that equips community college practitioners to meet the needs of all students.

Adult learners of color often return to—or enter—higher education with powerful lived experience while navigating complex responsibilities such as work and caregiving. At the same time, they confront systemic inequities and structural barriers, including institutional racism, ageism,

limited access to resources, and exclusionary curricula that fail to reflect their realities. Too often, these students are expected to adapt to systems and structures not designed with them in mind.

Culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies and practices challenge this dynamic. Rather than asking students to fit into existing models and conform to traditional norms, these frameworks call on institutions to transform in ways that honor, affirm, and sustain students’ identities, knowledge, and experiences. When faculty and staff are well-versed in culturally sustaining practices, they are better equipped to recognize and respond to the distinct needs and realities of adult learners of color—rather than treating them as an afterthought or treating them as interchangeable with “traditional-aged” students. By providing faculty and staff with the tools to create inclusive environments where these learners feel seen, valued, and supported, community colleges can dramatically improve adult learners’ sense of belonging, engagement, and success.

This work is especially critical in community colleges, which enroll a substantial proportion of adult learners—yet whose systems, processes, and procedures have rarely been designed with this population in mind. Professional development that supports community college faculty and staff in adopting culturally sustaining practices is often scarce, inconsistent, under-resourced, and misaligned with the specific needs of racially minoritized adult learners. This guidebook aims to help bridge this gap in professional development.

Intended for community college faculty, advisors, and student support staff, this guidebook offers a role-based approach to embedding equity into the educational experience of adult learners of color. Each section provides actionable strategies, reflection questions, and examples to help practitioners build capacity, deepen knowledge and understanding, and adapt their practices to serve adult learners of color more effectively.

Importantly, this guidebook acknowledges that the core challenge for community college professionals is not always a lack of professional development opportunities but that existing professional development often feels disconnected—lacking relevance, accessibility, or alignment with practitioners’ day-to-day responsibilities. This resource addresses that gap by supporting community colleges in offering professional development that is rooted in equity, grounded in culturally sustaining practices, and tailored to the realities of adult learners of color.



Understanding the Concepts: Culturally Relevant, Responsive, and Sustaining Practices

While the terms “culturally relevant,” “culturally responsive,” and “culturally sustaining” are often used interchangeably, there are nuances in their approach to supporting diverse learners. Although these frameworks share key values like academic success, cultural validation, and equity, they are distinct and unique.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, introduced by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), is designed to empower students academically, socially, and politically. It emphasizes three key tenets:

- **Academic success** – students must experience success in learning
- **Cultural competence** – students must maintain their cultural integrity while succeeding academically
- **Critical consciousness** – students must develop the ability to recognize, critique, and challenge societal inequalities.

In practice, culturally relevant pedagogy places students’ lived experiences and cultural knowledge at the center of the learning process, encouraging academic achievement and critical thinking about systemic inequality.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, advanced by Geneva Gay (2010), emphasizes the integration of students’ cultural references in all aspects of learning. This framework focuses on validating students’ home cultures, creating inclusive classroom climates, and employing instructional strategies informed by students’ cultures and experiences. It is a flexible and

adaptive model designed to make learning more accessible and meaningful

Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, conceptualized by Django Paris and H. Samy Alim (2014), builds the foundations of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogy but goes further. Rather than simply acknowledging students' cultures, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to effectively integrate and maintain them as part of their education. It is explicitly anti-deficit and anti-assimilationist, affirming students' right to bring and keep their linguistic and cultural identities within educational spaces, and reframes the role of education as a partner in cultural growth and preservation.

This guidebook is designed to help community college professionals examine how culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and culturally sustaining pedagogies and practices show up—or remain absent—in their day-to-day work with students. While all three frameworks are valuable and interrelated, this guidebook intentionally centers on culturally sustaining practices. Culturally sustaining pedagogy builds upon and extends the foundations of the other two approaches, pushing institutions to evolve in ways that not only include but also sustain and nurture the diverse ways of knowing, being, and learning that students—particularly adult learners of color—bring with them.

This focus reflects the urgent need to move beyond surface-level inclusion toward more profound, systemic transformation in how community colleges design learning environments, deliver services, and shape institutional culture. Accordingly, this guidebook offers insights into the types of

professional development needed to help faculty and staff meaningfully embed these practices into their classrooms, advising sessions, student engagement spaces, and everyday interactions. Culturally sustaining professional development is not a one-time training; it must be part of an ongoing commitment to building a reflective, relevant, and equity-rooted professional learning culture that continuously evolves to meet the needs of the diverse student populations community colleges serve.



Faculty

Embedding Culturally Sustaining Practices in the Classroom



Faculty are uniquely positioned to shape students' academic experience through course design, instruction, and assessment. For adult learners of color, the classroom is not just a site of learning—it must also be a space where inclusion, affirmation, and representation are intentional. Embedding culturally sustaining practices into pedagogy requires shifting from transactional teaching to relational, equity-focused engagement.

One key area of focus for faculty PD should be centered on the continuous development of cultural awareness and competence. Faculty need opportunities to engage in deep, sustained self-reflection to examine how their identities, assumptions, and instructional choices influence student experiences. This involves training on identity, power and privilege, critical consciousness, cultural humility, anti-racism, implicit bias, and microaggressions. These learning opportunities can take many forms, such as faculty learning communities, affinity groups, equity institutes, and racial literacy workshops, and should provide space for dialogue, reflection, and shared learning.

In today's anti-DEI climate, faculty must understand how culturally sustaining practices intersect with academic freedom. Despite a dominant narrative to the contrary, the First Amendment protects faculty's right—and responsibility—to develop curricula grounded in scholarly research and pedagogical integrity, including content related to race, identity, and inequality. Faculty can use this protection to frame culturally sustaining practices as essential to critical thinking, civic learning, and student success.

Another primary area of focus of faculty professional development should be curriculum redesign, one of the most powerful levers for change within their locus of control. Professional development that supports faculty in critically reviewing syllabi, readings, assignments, and assessments – asking questions such as “whose voices are centered? Who’s missing? Do students see themselves reflected in the materials?” – is particularly valuable. Faculty should evaluate whether their course content represents diverse perspectives and acknowledges the lived realities of students and their communities.

However, a culturally sustaining curriculum is not about adding a single “diverse” reading, but embedding students' lived experiences and community knowledge throughout the course. This includes incorporating real-world issues, using culturally relevant examples, and applying inclusive methods such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which provides multiple ways for students to engage with course content and allows for flexible assessment. It also involves utilizing open educational resources (OERs) that minimize financial barriers by providing free or low-cost learning materials. Together, these approaches help faculty build inclusive, equity-minded classroom practices that

make learning more equitable and responsive – especially for adult learners who may feel like outsiders in academic spaces.

Professional development for faculty should also include support to incorporate other instructional practices that contribute to inclusive and affirming classrooms, such as:

- Knowledge of culturally responsive teaching strategies that create space for students to bring their knowledge, languages, and identities into the classroom
- Trauma-informed pedagogy to recognize that students may have past experiences with a variety of traumas (i.e., systemic racism, economic struggles, etc.) that impact their educational experiences
- Providing flexible and culturally relevant assessments that allow students to demonstrate learning through multiple formats, using transparent assignment guidelines that clearly explain the purpose, tasks, and expectations of assignments, and reducing bias in grading and feedback via rubrics that clearly outline expectations and minimize subjectivity.

However, professional development for faculty should not be limited to the areas above. It can—and should—include a wide range of growth and development opportunities, such as how to:

- Co-create classroom norms that prioritize respect, inclusion of diverse viewpoints, and encourage collaborative learning over competitive dynamic
- Foster a growth mindset culture that normalizes struggles and mistakes as part of the learning process and uses asset-based language to highlight students' strengths rather than deficits
- Ensure equitable participation in the classroom
- Leverage technology to promote equity by using accessibility tools, offering materials in multiple formats to accommodate different learning needs, providing asynchronous and synchronous learning opportunities, and providing “just-in-time” support through technology like early alert systems
- Build relationships and trust by understanding students' educational journeys and personal experiences and offering holistic support that connects students with campus resources

Ultimately, faculty must engage in professional development grounded in reflection and community, providing space for honest dialogue, discomfort, and reflection. It must also be intentionally tailored to help faculty understand the specific needs of adult learners of color and ensure they are equipped to design courses and expectations that reflect the complexities of these learners' lived

experiences. Professional development for faculty must move beyond compliance towards being a transformative tool for equity. Faculty are central to that transformation –students thrive when faculty's growth is supported.

Action Steps

- **Attend at least one professional development session on anti-racism or equity-centered teaching each semester.**
- **Collaborate with a faculty union or academic freedom committee to remain informed about institutional protections.**
- **Conduct a curriculum audit to ensure diverse voices and perspectives are represented.**
- **Join or establish a faculty learning community centered on culturally sustaining pedagogy.**

IN PRACTICE: How Community Colleges Support Faculty Learning and Development

The following examples highlight how some community colleges and systems across the country have designed professional development that supports faculty in embedding equity-minded and culturally sustaining practices into their work. These efforts demonstrate how institutions can move from intention to implementation by offering professional development that is timely, relevant, and clearly aligned with supporting student success – including that of of adult learners of color.



[Lane Community College](#) requires all employees to complete cultural competency training. The Cultural Competency Professional Development (CCPD) initiative provides a range of training opportunities that cover topics such as implicit bias, intersectionality, and understanding social justice. Employees must complete a specified number of training hours every three years to improve their cultural awareness and responsiveness.



[The Alamo Colleges District](#) offers a comprehensive Faculty Development program that supports the continuous professional growth of its educators. This program provides a variety of opportunities, including workshops, seminars, and certification programs, all aimed at enhancing teaching effectiveness and promoting student success. By focusing on innovative instructional strategies and inclusive practices, the Faculty Development program ensures that faculty members are well-prepared to meet the evolving needs of a diverse student population. Through these initiatives, the Alamo Colleges District reaffirms its commitment to educational excellence and the professional advancement of its faculty.



[The Community College Consortium for Open Educational Resources \(CCCOER\)](#) provides faculty at community colleges nationwide with webinars, workshops, and a vibrant online community focused on inclusive and equitable teaching practices using open educational resources. Through a “train-the-trainer” model, faculty learn to design and adapt low-cost, culturally relevant course materials and then share those practices within their institutions. This model not only expands access to resources, but also supports faculty leadership in culturally sustaining pedagogy.

Additional Resources:

- [Putting Equity into Practice: Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning](#)
- [Culturally Responsive Teaching for Adult Learners](#)
- [Evidence to Action: Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching in Adult Education](#)

Staff

Embedding Culturally Sustaining Practices Beyond the Classroom



Conversations about equity and/or culturally sustaining work in higher education often center on the classroom. However, student success is a collective effort, and staff across campus influence the educational journey just as much as faculty. Community college staff and professionals outside the classroom play a crucial role in shaping students' day-to-day experiences – from admissions to advising to student life. Whether in financial aid, student engagement, or academic support, staff interactions shape how students perceive the institution, experience belonging, and navigate their overall experience. All staff have a role in advancing equity for adult learners of color.

Community college staff and student services professionals are often the first and most frequent points of contact for adult learners. These informal and formal conversations and interactions can either affirm or alienate students – especially students of color. Therefore, it is equally important for community college staff to engage in professional development that helps them integrate affirming, equity-minded practices into their everyday work with students, including adult learners.

More specifically, professional development should deepen staff's understanding of how much college messaging matters – and support them in communicating that messaging effectively to students. This includes ensuring that all materials, such as emails, forms, signage, and websites, are inclusive and accessible. That means using plain language, offering content in multiple languages, and designing materials that reflect students' cultural and linguistic identities.

This type of professional development should also encourage staff to view every student-facing message as an opportunity to affirm and empower. Training that helps staff develop and implement culturally affirming programming that values identity, builds community, and supports multigenerational participation is key. Affinity groups and spaces, family-friendly programming that acknowledges the presence of children or dependents on campus, and student leadership opportunities are just a few ways to welcome adult learners of color into the broader campus fabric.

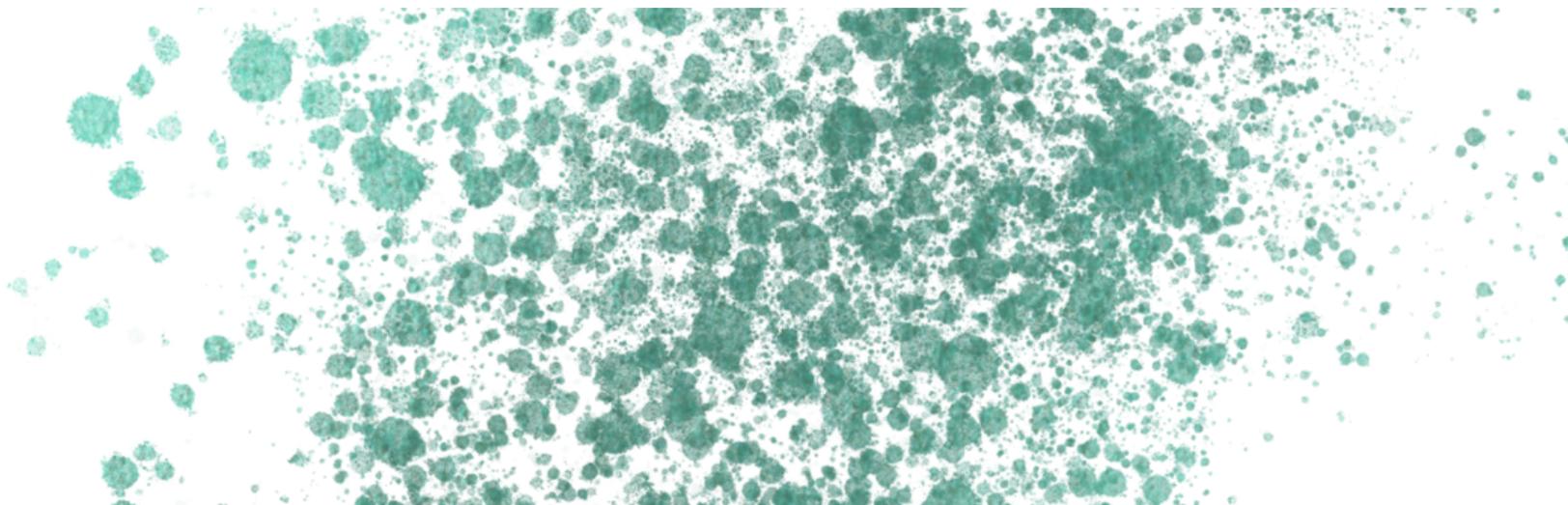
Moreover, professional development that helps staff develop or strengthen their advocacy skills is equally important, especially when it encourages staff to critically examine default models of “doing things” by asking questions like: “Who is this system or service model built for?” and “Who does it leave out?” By disaggregating usage data, collecting feedback, and proposing reforms, staff can lead efforts to align services with student realities. Professional development that provides space to grapple with these questions and advocate for systemic change is crucial.

Ultimately, culturally sustaining work is everyone's work. Faculty, advisors, student affairs professionals, and others have enormous power to shape whether adult learners of color feel seen, supported, and valued. When institutions are intentional about this work and provide regular and ongoing professional development opportunities for faculty and staff centered on embedding culturally sustaining practices, services can improve, and the broader institutional culture can see positive change.



Action Steps for Staff

- Participate in professional development focused on equity for student services staff, emphasizing cultural humility training that encourages ongoing self-reflection and dialogue about power, privilege, and identity and acknowledges the intersections of race, age, gender, and life experience
- Review one student-facing process or policy through a culturally sustaining lens
- Collaborate with DEI or institutional research offices to analyze equity gaps in service usage
- Involve adult learners in the planning of student engagement activities while accommodating their external responsibilities



IN PRACTICE: How Colleges Are Supporting Equity-Centered Learning for Staff

Professional development for student services and support staff is essential to advancing equity and improving the daily experiences of adult learners of color. The examples below highlight how colleges and systems are creating learning opportunities that help staff develop cultural awareness, strengthen their advocacy skills, and build more inclusive, affirming campus environments. These models demonstrate how institutions can move beyond one-time trainings to foster a culture of equity-minded, cross-functional learning that supports the full student experience—from enrollment to completion.



[The Online Network of Educators \(@ONE\)](#) is a comprehensive resource for professional development for faculty, staff, and administrators in California Community Colleges. It operates under the California Virtual Campus - Online Education Initiative (CVC-OEI) and offers a wide array of training opportunities designed to enhance online teaching and learning.

These include facilitated courses, self-paced modules, webinars, and workshops covering equitable grading strategies, accessibility, and effective use of digital tools like Canvas. @ONE also provides curated collections of resources focused on specific aspects of online instruction to help educators create engaging and inclusive learning environments. Through its commitment to high-quality, accessible professional development, @ONE is pivotal in advancing equity and excellence within the California Community Colleges system.



[The College of DuPage's Employee Development Center \(EDC\)](#) offers a comprehensive suite of professional development programs designed to meet the diverse needs of its faculty and staff. Committed to fostering continuous growth, the EDC provides various opportunities, including workshops, training sessions, and discussion forums that focus on enhancing both technical and soft skills such as communication and leadership. For faculty members, the EDC partners with the Faculty Professional Development Program to offer instruction-based courses that incorporate active learning and support collaborative teaching practices.

Additionally, the EDC organizes onboarding and orientation programs for new employees to ensure a smooth transition into the college community. By promoting an environment of ongoing learning and development, the EDC plays a crucial role in advancing the college's mission of excellence in teaching and learning.

IN PRACTICE: How Colleges Are Supporting Equity-Centered Learning for Staff



[The State University of New York \(SUNY\) Center for Professional Development \(CPD\)](#) offers a comprehensive array of professional development programs tailored for faculty, instructional support staff, student support professionals, technical staff, and campus leadership across its 64 campuses. As a cooperative and voluntary organization funded by its members and the SUNY system, the CPD promotes skill and knowledge development in various learning areas. SUNY CPD's programs cover numerous topics, including teaching and learning, student success, advisement, research, assessment, and the effective use of technology in education.

These programs are available in various formats, including asynchronous online classes, synchronous webinars, face-to-face workshops, video conferences, and on-site sessions at regional campus locations or corporate partner sites. Many of these programs are organized into certificate programs to help participants acquire the knowledge and skills necessary for effective work in higher education. Upon completion, participants earn digital badges that highlight the competencies they have acquired, which can be easily shared on professional platforms like LinkedIn.



[The North Carolina Community College System](#) has created Teaching and Learning Hubs to support full- and part-time faculty and staff educators. These hubs provide in-person, virtual, and hybrid workshops and seminars that promote equity in learning and enhance student success. By providing accessible professional development opportunities, the NCCCS cultivates a culture of continuous improvement and inclusive education.

Examples of How to Embed Culturally Sustaining Practices Into the Work of Other Staff Roles on Campus

Financial Aid and Enrollment Services

- Use plain language and translate documents into the various languages spoken in the community
- Send reminders via SMS, email, and phone calls, timed around the schedules of adult learners
- Host financial literacy workshops designed for adult learners, covering budgeting, FAFSA, childcare funding, and emergency aid.
- Partner with culturally-focused community organizations to expand reach and trust
- Implement equity-focused policies that streamline the appeals process for financial aid suspension, create flexible payment plans, and ensure that staff are trained to respond empathetically to financial challenges

Career Services and Workforce Development

- Acknowledge the systemic barriers present in the job market and affirm students' cultural strengths as valuable assets in the workplace
- Highlight industries that appreciate bilingualism, multilingualism, cultural competence, and community engagement
- Connect students with culturally aligned employers by fostering relationships with employers committed to DEI and by hosting employer panels and job fairs that focus on underrepresented industries and communities
- Customize resume and interview workshops and services to validate nontraditional work histories, caregiving roles, and community leadership

Institutional Research and IT Staff

- Disaggregate student data by race, age, and other identities, and regularly share equity data with frontline staff to help inform practices and identify gaps
- Use data storytelling to present equity concerns in a more human-centered and actionable way
- Ensure digital equity by providing loaner laptops, mobile hotspots, and tech navigation support to students disproportionately impacted by the "digital divide"
- Create accessible, mobile-friendly service platforms that accommodate students on the go

Library and Academic Support Services

- Curate culturally relevant resources that feature works by BIPOC authors and scholars, multilingual materials, and community histories
- Provide adult-centered learning spaces that offer quiet study areas with extended hours for working students
- Offer peer tutoring, writing centers, and workshops grounded in culturally inclusive pedagogies
- Diversify the staff and ensure they receive training in inclusive customer service and cultural awareness

Front Desk and First Point of Contact Rules

- Exude warm and affirming first impressions using welcoming body language, inclusive signage, and multilingual greetings
- Encourage students to access services instead of imposing restrictions or giving boilerplate, one-size-fits-all answers

Implementing and Sustaining Change



While individual efforts are essential, meaningful change requires coordinated, institution-wide commitment. Implementing culturally sustaining professional development for community college faculty and staff necessitates a clear vision, structured planning, and accountability.

Institutional commitment starts with leadership. Culturally sustaining professional development should be integrated into strategic plans, budget allocations, accreditation responses, and leadership messaging. When campus leaders consistently communicate and model equity-centered practices, they foster a culture of shared responsibility.

Moreover, designing and implementing effective institutional professional development for community college faculty and staff requires careful consideration of several administrative factors. For example, institutional leaders must determine the most suitable modalities for offering professional development. Ideally, professional development should encompass a variety of formats for faculty and staff. The offerings should be diverse in modality, including in-person, virtual, synchronous, and asynchronous options to accommodate different work styles and schedules.

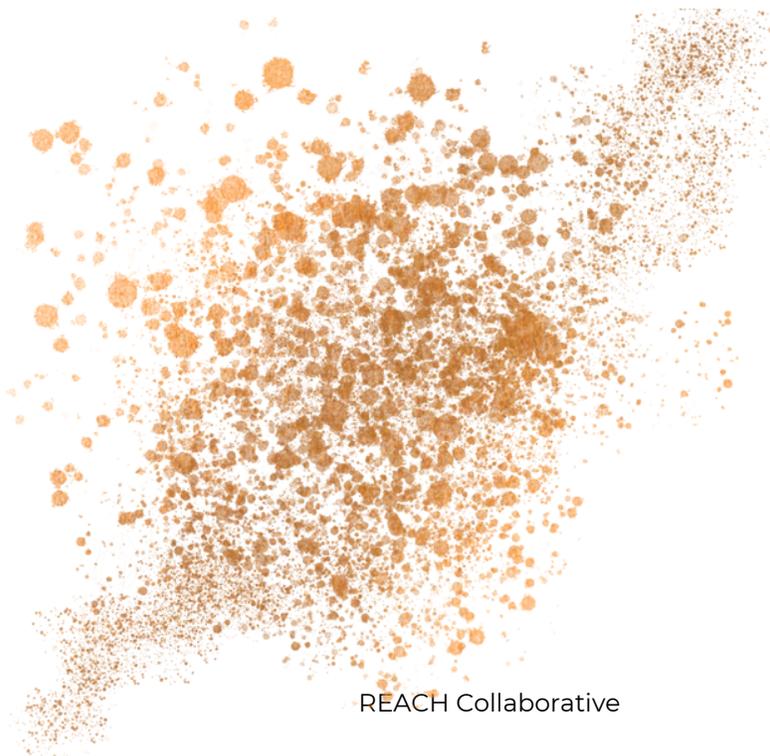
Additionally, there are other important questions to consider, such as:

- How frequently should professional development be offered?
- What would the cost of providing professional development activities be, and who is responsible for the payment?
- How should the institution market and advertise professional development activities to the campus community?
- Should professional development be voluntary or mandated?
- Should there be incentives for participating in professional development? If so, what types of incentives would be effective (e.g., stipends/honorariums, CEUs, certificates, badges, etc.)?

Institutional leaders must grapple with these questions as the answers will vary depending on their respective institutional contexts. When developing a professional development plan or activities for faculty and staff, involving these stakeholders in the planning and facilitation process is crucial. to ensure that the content is relevant and community-owned.

Measuring the impact of professional development for faculty and staff is vital for maintaining momentum. Institutions should collect participant feedback, encourage faculty and staff self-assessments, and review disaggregated student data, such as retention, completion rates, and student satisfaction, to assess the efficacy of faculty and staff engagement in professional development focused on embedding culturally sustaining practices into their work. The results of these evaluations should be utilized to make adjustments, ensuring that institutional professional development efforts remain effective and equity-driven.

Culturally sustaining professional development should not be viewed as an “add-on.” It is a core strategy for fulfilling the mission of community colleges: to serve all students equitably and support their success. By aligning theory with practice and individual actions with institutional structures, colleges can create environments where adult learners of color are not just included but can thrive.



Action Steps

- Form a cross-functional working group to oversee professional development focused on integrating culturally sustaining practices in the work
- Develop a multi-year professional development roadmap that includes evaluation checkpoints to assess progress
- Utilize planning templates to align departmental professional development goals with institutional equity metrics
- Regularly share professional development outcomes and progress updates to promote transparency and accountability



Elevating Field Perspectives: Insights from Community College Success Leaders



This guidebook was developed based on interviews with four leaders from community colleges and community college success centers. These leaders shared their insights on the design, delivery, and evolution of professional development efforts in their respective states and systems. Their perspectives, drawn from Ohio, California, North Carolina, and Michigan, highlighted six key themes that shed light on common challenges and promising practices in equity-focused professional development.

Professional Development Must Be Multi-Level and Role-Specific

In all interviews, leaders emphasized the importance of providing differentiated professional development for the various college roles, including full- and part-time faculty, mid-level leaders, advisors, institutional researchers, and other classified staff. Each of these professionals has unique responsibilities and needs that require tailored approaches. Laura Rittner, Executive Director of the Ohio Success Center noted, “It’s not just about training leaders. It’s about making sure those in the middle, those with the most proximity to students and change, are empowered with both knowledge and support.”

Additionally, several interviewees highlighted the necessity of extending professional development to often-excluded groups, such as part-time faculty and other staff. Cassie Donnelly from the California Success Center emphasized this by stating, “Professional development has historically focused on instructional faculty, but classified professionals, those working in financial aid, advising, basic needs, are often the face of the institution to our students. They need this support, too.”

Embedding Equity in an Anti-DEI Climate

Navigating today’s political climate, which is increasingly hostile to DEI efforts, requires a strategic approach. The four leaders discussed their initiatives to embed equity within their institutions while minimizing the risk of additional scrutiny. One strategy involved shifting terminology from “equity” to phrases like “student success” or “belonging” while keeping racial equity at the forefront.

Keisha Jones from the North Carolina Success Center noted, “Some colleges are uncomfortable having explicit conversations about race. Even in racial equity trainings, they’ll default to talking about poverty instead.” To address this issue, she adapted the training language to ensure it remained relatable across different institutional contexts while preserving its essential content. Similarly, Erica Orians, Vice President of the Michigan Success Center, explained that Michigan has adopted a data-informed and labor market-aligned approach. She stated, “We talk about disaggregated student outcomes, talent pipelines, and economic mobility because that language resonates regardless of political ideology.”

Moving from Awareness to Practical Action

Interviews revealed a significant gap between aspirational equity commitments and the actual practices in day-to-day operations. Many college leaders acknowledged that while their institutions publicly pledge to advance racial equity, few are willing to invest in the necessary training to make those commitments a reality in classrooms and across the campus community.

Laura Rittner pointed out, “We have a lot of people who want to do the right thing but don’t know what that looks like in practice.” Tools such as culturally sustaining curriculum audits, inclusive syllabus redesigns, and coaching on equity-minded advising practices have been developed to address this gap. Cassie Donnelly further emphasized, “We’re trying to shift from conceptual DEI work to functional equity work, where people leave a session knowing how to do their job differently tomorrow.”

Expanding PD for Supporting Adult Learners of Color

Support for adult learners, particularly those of color, remains limited. While some systems, such as Michigan, have made structural changes to better serve adult learners by implementing shorter terms and flexible scheduling, few have provided professional development that helps educators understand and support this population’s unique experiences and needs.

Keisha Jones pointed out, “There’s still a hesitancy to explicitly talk about adult learners of color. People want to talk about adult learners or students of color, but not both together.” In response to this tendency, she developed a workbook to help educators understand how race, age, and lived experience intersect to shape the needs of adult learners. Erica Orians echoed these sentiments, stating, “We need to stop assuming adult learners are just younger students with more responsibilities. They need to see themselves reflected in our systems.”

Sustaining Impact through Institutional Commitment

A critical component for the long-term success of professional education initiatives is institutions’ commitment and sustained investment. While many professional education efforts begin with grant funding, the most effective models align strategically with institutional goals, where institutions invest resources and staff time. For example, in Ohio and Michigan, colleges cover tuition or registration fees for leadership academies, transforming them into invested stakeholders in the outcomes. Laura Rittner emphasized this by stating, “Institutions have skin in the game when they’re putting up dollars and sending someone to a year-long program. It makes them more likely to support that person’s success back on campus.” Similarly, Erica Orians noted that although the Michigan Success Center follows up with alumni of their Leadership Academy, formal engagement with alumni engagement could enhance the program’s long-term impact.

Leveraging Statewide Infrastructure to Bridge Capacity Gaps

Many community colleges, particularly smaller or rural ones, face internal challenges in developing and delivering professional development. In response, states like California and North Carolina have established resources to fill this gap through their respective Vision Resource Center and Teaching & Learning Hubs. These shared platforms host training modules, webinars, and communities of practice that are accessible to colleges, making them especially beneficial for colleges with limited local or internal capacity.

However, Cassie Donnelly notes, “The VRC is only as useful as a college’s ability to integrate it into their day-to-day PD culture. Some colleges use it robustly; others never get past logging in.” It is essential to pair these tools with local champions, onboarding support, and incentives for participation. Keisha Jones further emphasized this point, stating, “You can’t just build a platform and expect people to come. You need intentional strategies for bringing folks in, especially those not traditionally prioritized in PD, like custodial staff or IT teams.”

In summary, these insights underscore that professional development is most effective when it is strategic, inclusive, and action-oriented. By learning from the field and adapting promising practices, community colleges can design professional development initiatives that strengthen institutional capacity and promote equitable student outcomes, especially for adult learners of color.



Conclusion

The journey toward culturally sustaining professional development in community colleges requires more than good intentions – it demands sustained institutional commitment, strategic resource allocation, and a willingness to transform systems that have historically excluded adult learners of color.

As the interviews with community college leaders demonstrate, successful implementation requires moving beyond surface-level awareness to practical, role-specific training that empowers faculty and staff to embed equity into their daily practice.

This work is particularly urgent as community colleges navigate an increasingly challenging political climate while serving growing populations of diverse adult learners who bring rich lived experiences and complex needs to campus.

Ultimately, culturally sustaining professional development is not an optional add-on but a fundamental component of fulfilling community colleges'

mission to serve all students equitably. When institutions invest in comprehensive, ongoing professional development that honors the cultural wealth of adult learners of color, they create environments where these students don't simply survive but thrive. The strategies outlined in this guidebook provide a roadmap, but lasting change will only occur when colleges commit to the long-term, reflective work of institutional transformation. By centering the voices and experiences of adult learners of color in professional development efforts, community colleges can become the inclusive, affirming spaces these students deserve – spaces that sustain not only academic success but also cultural identity and community connection.

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REACH Partners and Funders



Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. We envision a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation's need for talent through a broad range of credentials.



Education Strategy Group is a mission-driven consulting firm that works with K-12, higher education, and workforce leaders to achieve greater impact. We work across sectors to move the needle on issues that are critical to improving student success and advancing equity.



The mission of University of Pittsburgh School of Education is rooted in equity, justice, and innovation. Together, its community strives to: disrupt and transform inequitable educational structures, innovate and agitate for change, support the well-being of all learners, shape practice and policy, and forge engaged partnerships.



DVP-Praxis is an action-oriented, culturally responsive, and equity-focused consulting firm providing formative and summative evaluation services, strategic facilitation and advising, and technical assistance and training to support efforts to inform implementation and measure impact across postsecondary education and training systems.



Friday is a mission-driven strategy and design firm focused on three intersectional areas we believe are critical to shaping the future: learning that helps us realize our potential, work that gives us the opportunity to apply our talents, and communities that connect us to something bigger than ourselves. Our team of strategists, educators, and creatives have joined the REACH team to distill the work of the collaborative into simple, compelling messages and to share those widely with the field.

REACH
collaborative



**RACIAL
EQUITY** for
**ADULT
CREDENTIALS** in
HIGHER ED

The REACH Collaborative is focused on creating pathways designed for Black, Hispanic and Latino, and Native American adults to earn quality credentials that lead to a degree. We work with states and community colleges to replace systems and beliefs that unfairly hold adult learners of color back from a better education and life with pathways, supports, and practices that celebrate and value their unique lived experiences.