

EQUITY IN ACTION

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Grantmaking and Community Colleges: *Tensions and Pathways for Addressing Racialized Inequalities*

Heather McCambly
University of Pittsburgh



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The Equity in Action Research and Strategy Brief Series aims to explore and feature key issues, plans for action, and practices that advance and inclusion within P-20 education. These briefs seek to address persistent disparities in student opportunities and outcomes. By synthesizing current research, examining policy implications, and highlighting successful interventions, the series intends to provide educators, policymakers, and stakeholders with actionable insights to create more equitable learning environments. This series is designed to provide insights and guidance on developing, enhancing, and sustaining pathways that support students' transitions across educational tiers. Strengthen partnerships among schools, colleges, employers, and community organizations to create cohesive, culturally responsive pathways for students.

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University of Pittsburgh



There's no denying that in the last 20 years community colleges and the students they serve have become increasingly central focal points in the realm of U.S. postsecondary public policy and philanthropic funding strategies. Many of the papers, proposals, and discussions generated from this interest start with a rundown of familiar facts: Community colleges serve the most first-generation students, students of color, low-income students, returning adult students, and the greatest share of students, period, in the sector (see e.g., Ching et al., 2020; Dowd & Shieh, 2014; Eddy, 2018; Lester, 2014). These facts are used to signal to the reader that community colleges matter and they matter even more if we care about achieving greater racial equity and racial justice in postsecondary education. In some of these introductory narratives we also find reminders that community colleges are the least-resourced institutional type (Deming, 2020; Dowd et al., 2020; White, 2022). In other words, these colleges are serving the

students who have, on average, received the least structural support across their lifetime. And community colleges are doing so with, again, the least structural support—a public policy problem that has not yet found its solution.

The value of community colleges to achieving national educational and economic goals has not been lost in grantmaking circles. Indeed, funders ranging from the Kresge Foundation to the Lumina Foundation have touted the importance of partnering with and funding projects in community colleges as vehicles for achieving more equitable college participation and completion. And this is an important turn as, historically, community colleges have received the least support from both public sources (i.e., state appropriations and federal earmarks) (e.g., Choitz & Center for Law and Social Policy, 2010; Dowd et al., 2020; H. McCambly & Colyvas, 2022); McCambly & Aguilar, Under Review), as well as private ones (i.e.,

philanthropy) (Kelly & James, 2015; McClure et al., 2017). Over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, for instance, philanthropists endowed the most prestigious (and whitest) universities and liberal arts colleges with resources that would serve them and their students in perpetuity (Drezner, 2011; Lerner et al., 2008; Walton, 2019). By contrast, according to 2021 data from the Integrated Postsecondary Data System, the average community college endowment is less than .005% of an average research-intensive university's endowment. Inequitable endowment paired with limited and shrinking public investment is a racialized issue not only because minority-serving community colleges (MSCCs) have access to fewer resources than their predominantly white peers, but also because community colleges as a whole have been a racialized sector from their founding (McCambly et al., 2023).

The goal of this brief is to outline possibilities for new types of funder engagement with community colleges that might undermine the inequitable status quo. The sections that follow will situate grantmakers as critical actors in the postsecondary landscape, surface some of the key tensions with regard to community colleges, and offer a framework for reflective practice going forward.

Grantmaking in the Postsecondary Landscape

Since grantmakers are common, influential, and rarely researched in education policy, a brief word about them is in order. When we think of grantmakers, we typically think of big names like the Bill and Melinda Gates

Foundation, but there are also many regional and local funders that do critical education work as well as public grantmakers like the National Science Foundation and programs out of the US Departments of Education or Labor like the emerging-HSI grant programs or the Trade Adjustment Assistance Community College and Career Training grants. We note, however, that in the 2025 political context the ability of federal agencies to make equity-focused grants (or grants in general) has already been severely curbed, throwing the future of public grantmaking into question. This uncertainty positions private funds as all the more critical for community colleges given the now-forbidden equity focus of many community college grants.

Through competitive grants, funders impact educational institutions and the politics of education itself by providing resources and a public platform to some individuals, researchers, policy issues, and colleges to the exclusion of others (Reckhow, 2012; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Reckhow & Tompkins-Stange, 2018; Tompkins-Stange, 2016). In postsecondary grantmaking as in other fields, whiter and more privileged colleges and organizations typically receive a disproportionate level of grantmakers support and funding. Grantmaker influence fields, as they have in the case of community college practice, in the ways they work as cross-network conveners, policy brokers, incubators of innovation, and thought leaders (i.e., agenda setters). (For additional reading, see McCambly & Colyvas (2023) and McCambly & Anderson (2020).



Whereas educational grantmakers have typically advocated for relatively progressive policy ideas, their historical involvement in education and social policy has served to temper and impede the most progressive movements for change (Bartley, 2007; Francis, 2019; Wooten, 2010). Instead, grantmakers often choose incremental policy strategies tamping down calls for more radical change. Additionally, the administrative burdens (e.g., reporting requirements, laborious and intensive grantwriting expectations) enforced by many grantmakers put grassroots and less-resourced organizations (like community colleges) in a difficult position to access and maintain funding (McCambly & Colyvas, 2022). This can pressure organizations to change their operations to fit funder preferences, even if it is not in their students' best interests. In domains beyond the realm of education, philanthropy has exhibited a comparable pattern, characterized by discrepancies between professed objectives of racial fairness and actual investments (Cyril et al., 2020). That said, postsecondary grantmakers in recent years have taken a distinct turn toward centering issues of equity and racial justice in their strategy, vision, and grant investments (McCambly, 2023), a turn that may have supported the dissemination of equity-focused dialogues in the sector.

Tensions in Community College Grantmaking

Philanthropists of the early 20th century can be characterized as institution builders--they built laboratories, libraries, museums, and they endowed universities (Drezner, 2011). And of course, these

institution-building investments were disproportionately granted to white, elite institutions. Today's grantscape focuses instead on project-based or what is often called "strategic" grantmaking (Tompkins-Stange, 2016). Strategic grantmaking characterizes a strategy intended to spark changes or practices but not sustain them. While well intentioned, philanthropy's focus on extremely time-limited projects sticks colleges with the responsibility to carry on with existing funds--a move that can fail to equitably support organizations that serve more minoritized students and communities (McCambly et al., 2022).

More recently in the postsecondary space, strategic grantmaking has oriented itself loosely around the College Completion Agenda (CCA). The CCA is a public policy agenda driven in no small part by grantmakers emphasizing a shift from college access to college success across all levels of policy and practice (Haddad, 2021; Lester, 2014; McCambly, 2023). It is in the CCA context that community colleges began in the late 2000s to receive greater attention as key to achieving far-reaching college completion goals. However, the strategic approach can leave community colleges on the back foot as they continue to work without extensive endowments and capital investments. These foundational resources, common at research universities, provide a level of self-determination and baseline capacity rarely seen in community colleges.

A second tension in the community college funding space is how, given their mission, it can be all too easy to position the choice to fund or intervene at a community

college as one that is inherently equity-oriented. However, many projects in the era of the CCA have failed to make explicit their commitment or theory of action for disrupting racialized inequities built into the community college space both via funding levels and the pedagogical, wrap-around supports, and structural services dependent on those levels. It is no surprise then that while college completion, including at community colleges, has increased across the board in the last decade, the failure of institutions to equitably serve students of color remains unchanged (McCambly, 2023).

Bringing these points to life, two campaigns emblematic of the tensions created by strategic grantmaking for community colleges are guided pathways reform initiatives and the Achieving the Dream model for collecting and using student-level data for community college improvement. In both cases, significant funds from multiple funders went toward community college issues (although not all to colleges) and both involved capacity building projects—one for program redesign and the other toward institutional research capacity. However, with regard to equity, neither initiative was: 1) Derived from the expertise of community colleges themselves with representation from minority-serving community colleges, 2) Equipped in its first iteration with a theory of change specific to diminishing racial inequity, and 3) Intended to build the financial capacity of institutions toward institutional equity that would disrupt racialized funding patterns in the field. The result is that both initiatives have had to (or are still) redesigning their work

and vision toward racially equitable goals. And moreover, this work has successfully encouraged institutions to build new programs or professional positions, but has left institutions to deal with their underlying resource shortfalls.

And lastly, the current white racial backlash against commitments to educational equity has put many community college leaders and practitioners across the country in a difficult position. While we have little research around how to best support colleges through this backlash, grantmakers are in a uniquely flexible and potentially powerful position to support college leaders, administrators, students, and researchers to resist calls to return to practices known to perpetuate systemic racism. While some may be tempted to go quiet or move to more race-evasive commitments, it is critical that funders support colleges in standing firm in light of the years of research underscoring that if educational change does not target racism intentionally, then it will recreate it.

Call to Reflective Action

With the freedom philanthropy possesses relative to many state and institutional actors comes great responsibility—responsibility to act and responsibility to move and be bold when others cannot. Grantmakers committed to racial justice in community colleges have the opportunity to challenge practices that reinforce racialized hierarchies in and for community colleges and amplify pathways out of these practices. Of course, while much of the onus falls on grantmakers—who are themselves powerful actors--dismantling pervasive white supremacist systems and structures

is not the task of one powerful actor in the community college space. Grantseekers can also draw on the framework presented below to guide their engagement with grantmakers. For example, potential recipients can surface their own metrics of success, expect greater grantmaking and infrastructure supports from foundations, and incorporate partnerships with students and Black, Indigenous, and People-of-Color led organizations and groups at the start of any initiative.

A few education funders in recent years--and some in direct response to the wave of solidarity with Black Lives Matter following the state-sanctioned murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others--have revised their approaches and strategies in ways that provide possibility models for this work. The [Nellie Mae Foundation](#), for example, [reenvisioned its strategy](#) in 2020 to champion "efforts that prioritize community goals, that challenge racial inequities and advance excellent, student-centered public education." To achieve this end, Nellie Mae introduced six commitments, all of which are a significant departure for the foundation, but also for strategic educational philanthropy in general. These commitments included: supporting organizations led by people of color, advancing community partnerships, amplifying youth voice, building (grassroots) movements and networks, strengthening state and national coalitions to eliminate barriers to racial equity, and championing student-centered learning to reflect a greater focus on racial equity. If applied to a community college funding portfolio, these

commitments could have a radical impact on the current political climate for these institutions. To this end, we close by offering a reflective framework with anchoring exemplars as a practical tool for grantmakers and grantseekers alike to reimagine and redesign strategies toward more racially transformative funding practices.





Reflective Framework Towards Transformative Grantmaking in Community Colleges*

	Non-transformative, status quo approaches	Approaches that center equitable transformation
Who do foundations and grantmakers rely on as experts or trusted grantees?	Knowledge and legitimacy are centered in traditionally credentialed and in-network experts based in elite, white-led institutions.	Introduce closed RFPs to community colleges and minoritized community members or minority-led organizations; Reframe ways of knowing centered within minoritized communities as indispensable; Introduce permanent grant-writing and other infrastructure (e.g., evaluation, operating support) supports for community colleges and minority-led organizations.
What requirements do foundations and grantmakers place on applicants and grantees?	Burdensome grant-writing and reporting processes are emphasized. Reporting centers around quantifiable, and solely student-level, rather than systems-level, interventions.	Afford agency to community college grant recipients to determine metrics of success; Reconsider and intentionally lighten unnecessary administrative burdens; Set priorities for funding grassroots organizations and community-college led movements in ways that do not require them to bureaucratize or change focus; Maintain any funding flexibilities developed via COVID-19 for communities who experience social crises at disproportionate rates regardless of the pandemic.
How are foundations supporting equity commitments in the face of white racial backlash?	Leaning away from race-conscious language and acknowledging racism as a systemic problem when tensions arise.	Exploring and investing in strategies supportive to movement building in support of continued racial justice commitments and centering voices of Black, brown and indigenous students and organizations.

	Non-transformative, status quo approaches	Approaches that center equitable transformation
What type of funding do foundations and grantmakers prioritize?	Strategic, project-based grantmaking with limited overhead or operating funds is given priority; Funding preferences given to elite and white-led organizations.	Center community-controlled grantmaking; Prioritize long-term commitments to operating grants for cash-strapped community colleges and grassroots organizations. Consider investments that build up the long-term financial capacity of community colleges through mobilizing communities to secure public support or through direct giving.
What are foundations' and grantmakers' targets of intervention? Who or what do they expect to change?	Grant dollars are delivered to organizations/systems controlled by and grounded in whiteness to target "equity gaps."	Grant dollars are delivered for the purpose of weakening racism as an active and ongoing system of power and control; Initiatives must recognize that systems of formal power are deeply tied up in white supremacist projects.
How do foundations and grantmakers operate in ways that constrain opportunities for transformative funding?	Foundations are operating with a fundamental commitment to existing in perpetuity without accountability to giving where it hurts to achieve racial equity.	Center articulated mission rather than perpetual existence; Conduct self-evaluations that hold foundations accountable for anti-racist contributions.

*Adapted from McCambly, H., Mackevicius, Claire, & Villanosa, K. (2022). Answering the Call (for Proposals): Moving Toward Justice in Postsecondary Philanthropy. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 54(4), 23–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2022.2078151>

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CCRPL@Pitt Education

Community College Research, Praxis, and Leadership