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**To:** CSU Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

**From:** [Connie Tan](#), [CSU Student Success Network](#)

**Topic:** **Addressing Racism in the California State University System: A Conversation with Dr. Frank Harris III**

The confluence of a global pandemic and a pervasive pattern of police brutality against the Black community has magnified deep structural and social inequities in the United States. This interview with [Dr. Frank Harris III](#), professor of postsecondary education and co-director of the [Community College Equity Assessment Lab](#) at [San Diego State University](#), explores the context for and implications of these issues on racial equity work in the [California State University \(CSU\)](#) system. Dr. Harris's work addresses racial inequity in postsecondary education, prioritizes students from historically-marginalized groups, and examines students' development and the social construction of gender and race in college contexts.

In this interview, Dr. Harris encourages institutions to take an equity-minded, student-centered approach. He suggests that middle leaders on campus (that is, faculty, staff and administrators who work with students often without a formal leadership position) need to recognize and take steps to address institutional racism and oppression in four key areas: curriculum, budget, hiring practices, and strategic planning. And he highlights the importance of engaging and partnering with students as drivers of change.

**Connie Tan (CT): How do you define equity in your work?**

**Dr. Frank Harris (FH):** Equity is ultimately about addressing issues of disproportionate impact. And when we talk about disproportionate impact, we recognize that there are certain groups of students who are not fully benefiting from the opportunity to be enrolled in our postsecondary institutions, in comparison with other students. When we look at almost any indicator of student success, there are certain communities of color that are disproportionately impacted—our justice-impacted students, our former foster youth, and our students who experience basic needs insecurities. So, a large part of this work involves recognizing where the disproportionate impacts are, and then also coming up with equity-minded strategies to address them. And by equity-minded strategies, we mean specifically that we are not blaming the students for a lack of success; we are looking at ways in which institutions can be more effective in serving and supporting students.

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This Knowledge Center memo is the first in a series created by the [CSU Student Success Network \(Network\)](#). The Knowledge Center is an online resource—forthcoming in full in 2021—that will provide curated, synthesized, and succinct information and links to support faculty, staff, and administrators in adopting equity-minded and student-centered approaches on their campus. The CSU Network was created by and for CSU faculty, staff, administrators, and students to advance equitable student learning, engagement, progression, and success. It is facilitated by the [Education Insights Center \(EdInsights\)](#) at [Sacramento State](#), an independent research and policy center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education.



**CT: In what ways do you think structural racism and oppression manifest in higher education, particularly in the CSU?**

**FH:** We know structural racism and systemic oppression are embedded in the fabric of United States culture. The entire country was founded on 1) the oppression of indigenous communities and indigenous people, and 2) the slave trade, slave labor, and how slave labor was used to advance the country economically. So systemic oppression is at the core of the country's identity. And because higher education in the United States was founded in line with the ideals and the values of the country at that time, higher education is rife with issues related to systemic racism and oppression. For example, our system of higher education was not designed to educate people of color, poor people, and women. Even though we have been afforded some access—both as students and as faculty members—at its roots and at its foundation, we are still operating in a system that was never intended for us to be a part of, and that is why we consistently run into challenges and issues. Even though things have changed and there are tangible indicators of progress, there are still long-standing challenges and issues that have been with us from the historical roots of higher education. Because the CSU is a part of the system of higher education, there are some challenges there. I think where we might be a little bit better off than some institutions and some systems is that we do serve a high concentration of people of color. That being said, we still have challenges and we still struggle with issues that are directly related to systemic oppression and institutional racism—the same issues upon which the country was founded upon.

**CT: How do we build the case for why middle leaders should prioritize or invest their time in addressing structural racism and racial equity in the CSU?**

**FH:** I think, first, that there has to be some recognition that these issues exist and that they warrant reconsideration and examination. Recognition and awareness is the very first step... We have to acknowledge that just because some people of color have made it—that we have experienced some success—that does not mean that the system is fair and equitable and it is the way it should be... Many of those who succeed do so at significant costs to our mental health, relationships, and other important things. And so I think the first step is recognition.

The second piece is making sure that we acquire the tools and the frameworks to be critical and to say, “Okay, this is where we see disparities.” For example, in our graduate education, most of us do not learn about critical race theory or racial battle fatigue. We do not learn about the frameworks, tools, and theories that we need, not only to make sense of our experiences, but also to engage in a real critique of the system—a critique that would better position ourselves to actually do something about it. We also need to have access to the strategies related to community organizing, coalition building, and critical policy analysis. So there are things that we do not get that we need to have in order to move the system forward in a meaningful way.

**CT: What advice do you have for middle leaders to address structural racism in the CSU? Where are the key opportunities to engage them in this work?**

**FH:** We are experiencing a watershed moment right now in our country much like the Civil Rights Movement. We have always had folks who have been aware of racialized atrocities and how they disproportionately impact the people in communities of color, but with the murder of George Floyd that was broadcasted and streamed for the entire world to see, I think that



has raised critical awareness and changed a lot of minds and hearts. Moments like that have convinced people who were skeptical and who questioned whether systemic oppression and racism existed. We also have the COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted all of us. And again, it had a disproportionate impact on communities of color. With the intersection in these two global pandemics, there is some momentum—I think there’s enough people now, and enough energy around the need to change, so that it gives me some hope and optimism. In terms of what educators can do, particularly those at the postsecondary level, we know where the lifeblood of colleges and universities are. It is your curriculum, hiring practices, budget, and strategic planning. We really have to work hard to decolonize those spaces.

**Curriculum.** We need to have a curriculum that is unapologetically antiracist, that whether you are learning chemistry, or you want to be a sociologist or a social worker, that you are going to be exposed to a curriculum that teaches you how to be antiracist. As Ibram X. Kendi says, “You are either racist, or you are antiracist.” There is no middle ground. We need to make sure that we are creating curriculum that is antiracist, across all universities, disciplines, and programs.

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**Hiring practices.** We have to deeply examine our hiring practices, especially when it comes to faculty hiring. We have to diversify our faculty, because we know representation matters. If we want students of color to see themselves and feel a sense of belonging in our institutions, then students have to see some reflection of them in the curriculum, but also in the faculty. And that’s not to say that faculty have to be completely 100 percent composed of people of color, but we certainly need to have more representation than what we see now across the institutions.

**Budget.** If we say that equity and addressing systemic racism are priorities, then our budgets have to reflect those priorities. And that means that we might have to make some different decisions than we have in the past.

**Strategic planning.** Strategic planning sets the priorities of an institution for years. During the next three to five years, when it comes to the allocation of resources and decision-making and establishing priorities on everything from hiring to budget to whatever it is, the strategic plan sets the stage for all of that. So if we are going to make a commitment to be an antiracist system with antiracist institutions, then that needs to be reflected not only in our strategic plan, but also in our mission, vision, and values—everything that we say that communicates who we are, to our own communities.

And then the last point I will make is that there has to be some reconciliation of the past. There has to be some acknowledgement and critical re-examination of who are the people that are edified, historically, in a university. Who are the names on the buildings? Who are the statues that we see, mascots that we have? Part of reconciliation is taking more intentional steps and actions to remedy the past. There’s obviously a lot of work to be done.



**CT: What role can students serve in surfacing these issues on their campus? How can the campus engage students in this work, especially students of color and those from marginalized groups, without creating harm or unintended consequences?**

**FH:** Students are actually more powerful and influential than they realize... We proudly serve a wide range of students in the CSU. We have adult learners, students who attend part-time and work full-time, and students who have families. They all have other priorities. But when students get engaged with an issue that is really salient in our system, they can help bring change. For example, we have had Ethnic Studies for years, and then what followed was Women's Studies, and now we have LGBT Studies. That was all made possible because of the work and advocacy of students.

Institutions need to do a better job of not only listening to students, but proactively engaging them and inviting them to be a part of the conversation. But as an institution, we do not do a good job of leveraging the student talent that we have. We need to invite students to be more part of the conversation...not just the leaders in student government but also other students as well who may not be a part of the formal leadership structure.

At my institution, I try to provide a voice and platform for students. I seek students' stories and try to understand the common threads in those stories. And I try to do a really good job of honoring those stories and making sure that I communicate to the leadership, "This is what students are saying, this is what they are experiencing, here is how you can better address their needs and concerns." A big part of what we can do is follow through on what they tell us and follow up with them as well to say, "Here are some concrete changes that we are making as a result of the feedback you shared with us." One of the worst things we can do is seek their information, guidance, and input, and then not follow through because it is not convenient, it is not easy, or whatever the reasons may be.

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**CT: As the CSU continues to offer virtual instruction and support, what are some key priorities that middle leaders should keep in mind to ensure equitable learning opportunities for students in the CSU?**

**FH:** We need to understand that we are in a different moment and we cannot do things the way we have always done them. We have to be more effective with regard to designing and delivering instruction. We have to do a better job of offering intrusive support to students. We have to work harder at building relationships with students. We have to be better at making referrals. So if we want to be more effective as instructors, in teaching and supporting students, then we have to focus more intentionally on it. And we also need to change our mindset about what a successful student is and looks like. So we need to reconsider a lot of long-standing, deeply held assumptions that we were socialized to embrace. And we need to recognize that we live in a completely different society now. The way that students acquire and access information, the way that we assess learning, what employers are going to need—all of that is changing and needs to change.



## Reflection Questions

For faculty, staff, or administrators interested in starting conversations about racial equity on your campus, we offer the following questions as potential prompts:

- Dr. Harris suggests that “Equity is ultimately about addressing issues of disproportionate impact.” What areas of disproportionate impact exist on our campus? Which ones are related to our roles on campus?
- What do we know about our students, their experiences, and their needs related to these areas of impact? How do we find out more or collect information about what students need?
- What specific steps can our campus take to address student needs in relation to the areas of disproportionate impacts identified?
- Do we consider our campus to be “student-centered?” What are some promising examples? How can our campus become more student-centered?
- In relation to the curriculum, hiring practices, budget, and strategic planning, where can we use an equity-minded approach to make an impact? Are there additional areas (e.g., student services) where we can make improvements?
- What are some possible challenges that we may encounter and how can we be prepared to address them? Where can we turn for allies and additional information?
- How can we engage and partner with students in this work?

## Resource List

In partnership with [Dr. J. Luke Wood](#), Dr. Harris has been offering a series of [webinars](#) tailored to faculty, staff, and administrators’ needs and grounded in research. Of these learning opportunities, he recommends these equity-minded approaches for educators:

- [Employing Equity-Minded & Culturally-Affirming Teaching and Learning Practices in Virtual Learning Communities](#)
- [Equity-Minded Student Services in the Online Environment](#)
- [Addressing Anti-Blackness on Campus: Implications for Educators and Institutions](#)

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