

**Date:** May 2021  
**To:** CSU Faculty, Staff, and Administrators  
**From:** Connie Tan, [CSU Student Success Network](#)  
**Topic:** “Equity, Fairness, and Parity” in the CSU System: A Conversation with Dr. Leece Lee-Oliver

The convergence of a global pandemic and pervasive patterns of racial injustice has magnified the deep structural and social inequities in the United States. In this interview, Dr. Leece Lee-Oliver (Blackfeet, Choctaw, Wyandot, Cherokee), assistant professor of Women’s, Gender & Sexuality Studies and American Indian Studies and director of American Indian Studies at [Fresno State University](#), explores the context for and implications of racial equity work in the [California State University \(CSU\)](#). Other interviews by the CSU Network addressing equity in the CSU include conversations with [Dr. Frank Harris III](#), [Dr. William Franklin](#) and [Dr. J. Luke Wood](#), and a [student plenary](#) at the CSU Student Success Network Conference in 2020.

Dr. Lee-Oliver’s work is dedicated to understanding how American Indians, Indigenous Peoples, and marginalized peoples experience and respond to national policies and societal beliefs that pose challenges to their sovereignty, safety, and security. In this interview, Dr. Lee-Oliver encourages faculty, staff, and administrators to reflect on and evaluate continuously how various forms of inequities manifest on campus. She suggests that middle leaders on campus (that is, faculty, staff, and administrators who work with students, often without a formal campus leadership title) take a step back and ask themselves and their colleagues: What kind of campus and world are we trying to create? How does the campus create space for us and for our students? To recognize and overcome preconceived notions that may impact us and that we know impact students and their communities, Dr. Lee-Oliver recommends that we need to consider how students represent the world around us, listen and take time to understand their experiences, and work to foster their strengths. These are all parts of an ongoing process of learning how to address and confront inequities while we create a campus climate that fosters diverse ways of thinking, living, and finding joy in the world.

This Knowledge Center memo is one in a series created by the [CSU Student Success Network](#). [The Knowledge Center](#) is an online resource—to be fully launched later in 2021—created by the CSU Network 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.



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

**Leece Lee-Oliver (LLO):** Equity, fairness, and parity all go together. No matter who is in a space, they should be able to have a sense that they have a voice, a presence; that having ideas that are different from the current conversation is okay. Within the scope of all of that, I really lean toward a social justice ethic and I try to encourage mindfulness. Equity is not an easy achievement. It requires a constant tending and to do that, anyone in a position of authority and power over others has to assess and reassess. I ask myself: Well, what do I think I mean in this discussion topic or goal? You have to do a lot of self-evaluation, but ultimately, the quest for equity creates space among us so that we all are equally present and equally have a voice.

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

**LLO:** Because we are talking about institutional racism, one of the challenges is that a lot of people do not know what that means. As we saw back when Proposition 209 was being fought for and against, many people did not know what structural racism was. We have a similar confusion today about affirmative action and privilege: white privilege, heterosexual privilege. We are stuck, and we have been for decades, in a conversation that pretends that we do not have structural racism—that occurs when cultural hegemony and all of its mechanisms are so normalized that systematic oppression in its many forms becomes invisible to enough people that forward movement is challenging. Within cultural hegemony, societies can also overdetermine that structural racism is the problem we have to tackle when, in actuality, we also have structural sexism, structural homophobia, structural ableism, structural nativism, and beyond. So, what we have in the society around us also manifests in the cultures of our campuses.

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From my understanding of studying society and doing research, many of these lapses of understanding reflect, sadly, a failure of our education system (from K-12 through higher education) to prepare people to understand the country and the broader world we live in. As people in the U.S., we have yet to teach and learn what structural systems are and how they operate. With the exception of educational curriculum that highlights governmental, economic, trade, water, or legal systems, etc., curricular standards can give access to curriculum that is at once informative and yet absent of its economic, social, and environmental impact. So, in some cases, students may learn about structural systems. But without elements of critical thinking, they are less prepared to see those structures as problematic and may even lean toward defending the systems as autonomous, rather than socially constructed and impactful. Certainly, then it can be challenging to accept that structural systems may even contribute to or create and uphold limitations on people’s liberties and freedoms. Moreover, many people understand that we have juridical freedom—those freedoms that are granted to us by law: civil rights, political rights, and treaty rights. However, I ask myself how I am helping students to understand not only that structural systems exist, but also how oppression exists. In addition, that we not only have instituted rights to oppose and change the outcomes, but that inherent in the U.S. Constitution and



treaties, is the liberty to push against the system, to live as free entities, as human beings. Many of us are not prepared and do not understand that structural issues exist let alone that they constitute oppressive systems. To get to a point where we can imagine and then create change, we have to address what we know and do not know about our shared problem of structural oppression. I would add that students are at the ready to share, explain, critique, and strategize ways to create institutions where their intellectual labor is valued and become part of the solution.

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

**LLO:** In the CSU, why do these limitations persist? As faculty, administrators, and staff we represent the world we live in. To paraphrase Albert Memmi, we bring the world home. In fact, as the CSU, we are the academic home to one of the most diverse student bodies in the nation. How we create space for students to grow, train, and prepare for the world outside of the classroom is critical. Our ability to teach to student potential depends on our willingness to address issues of structural oppression.

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Equity and inequity operate in all sorts of minute ways and big ways. One way shows up when instructors or academic advisors sit down with students and assess their academic pathways and professional opportunities. When instructors and advisors are engaged in assessing student potential and progress, it is not only the transcripts or grades on the page that are being considered; it is all of the instructors and advisors’ deeper thinking around who students are. So, part of structural racism has to do with having preset ideas that are based in illogical stereotypes about different races. And then we teach to those, we act on those. For example, Native Americans and People of Color are frequently perceived through the lens of “deficiency models,” which marks students as poor, possibly undereducated, and otherwise less prepared for advancement than a student who presents as economically privileged (class assumptions feed into ideas about previous institutional accessibility, tutoring, sports, etc.). Because of that, what happens with Black students, African American students? What happens with Asian American students? What happens with Hmong students who are perceived as very different from Japanese students? All of these micro- and macro-assumptions matter. It matters every day; it matters in every classroom; it matters every time a person sits with a colleague; it matters every time somebody sits with a student in advising. All of that matters, and all of that can both stem from and contribute to structural racism, but people do not want to think of themselves in that way. We then try to soft-foot our way into a conversation about implicit bias, and even that makes people uncomfortable. Probably one of the first things we are going to have to do is deal with the fact that our comfort is not exactly the priority. Learning is not usually comfortable no matter what. We have such limited conversations about these things right now that it makes it hard to get anywhere and move.



**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?**

**LLO:** The first things I think of are: What do you want in the world? What do you want to leave behind as your personal legacy? If you could look back on the life you lived, what would you have hoped you had been and done? I think it really starts there, because we are creating the world we live in. My students may be the legislators who have something to say about my life later, they may be the teachers of my kids or my grandkids, they may be my doctor or my nurse, or they may be the person I need to turn to for help later. What am I doing to prepare them all equally, to find their strengths, and to convey that they and all of their gifts matter, are visible, and important to creating a more just world? At some point, we must enact the compassion that we need. When I think of us as instructors, I wonder how we can learn to be better and better. I had the great fortune of having parents and grandparents who, rather than foreclose on what contributions were valuable or value-less, they held the great expectation that we grow our talents, use our minds, and do something meaningful with our lives. I take that view of my students too. It makes me a better listener and reader (when I am grading papers).

I believe that when it comes down to why we are really here as educators, we are influencing people's life choices, how they see themselves, and how they see their potential... I would hope that I and my colleagues continue to put some time in every year to think: How might I create better conversations in a classroom? How might I create assignments where people express themselves, and where I can hear where they are coming from, and connect, and make them feel visible in a world that is very much all about erasure? I think it really takes humility, as an educator, to always be a learner. As my grandfather said, whether you go to college or not, life is your college. You should learn throughout your whole life.

**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?**

**LLO:** We have to step back and think about our motives. As an instructor, I am committed to graduating people, teaching them to buckle down and do their work, and watching and listening so that I can assist them along the way to find career choices that will make for meaningful lives later on. Similarly, I think middle leaders and upper-level leaders would really do well by all of us to look at our institutions, listen, and ask: What are we trying to be here? We have to check ourselves about our motivations and to understand the goals we set for our students, as well as learn who our students are so that we build to their diverse strengths.

I think what middle leaders can do is think and rethink how they discuss what the education outcomes *ought* to be.

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Our campuses hold so much promise and have at the ready the intellectual labor to do it—universities are among the few complex and diverse intellectual centers, where problem-solving is a daily activity. One of the things that would be fantastic is to start promoting and rewarding collaborative projects and think tanks regularly, but that also have the authority to create and define what is meaningful and productive. Supporting collaborative, integrative, intellectual discovery as an entry point has the capacity to produce a wide range of possibilities for building educational systems that make structural oppression less possible. Where people are very hesitant to collaborate in meaningful ways as partners has more to do with a lack of meaningful incentives, recognition of the labor, or productive outcomes. If we draw on the social sciences to imagine, for a moment, a tradition rich in collaboration, we might have a starting point. The sciences in Native American intellectual systems, for example, grow out of observing the interconnected ways that different natural phenomena happen, learning from observation, and then engaging. I think that models of leadership can be more creative and much more organic than they are.

**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?**

**LLO:** All campuses have student groups, student activism, and student efforts that aim to be heard. Whether that’s in clubs or student government, I think one thing that can happen is an invitation to a forum where students can talk with leadership, work together over a year’s time, and see the fruits of their labor in positive outcomes. We can do a much better job of cultivating students’ understanding of how to engage in those forums and push for change. These spaces need to feel open, where there is follow-up, and where students feel heard... We need to open ourselves to communicating and quit perpetuating invisible barriers. We can mentor students to grow their understanding of protocol, while not wielding power unnecessarily. It is possible and may be one of our best paths forward. When Principal Chief Wilma Mankiller wanted to know what the Cherokee people thought would make life better on their reservation, she went door-to-door and asked. When families echoed one another asking for a water system, she organized neighborhood groups, got materials donated, and together the community built their own infrastructure. She was a Principal Chief; she did not have to go door-to-door or pick up a shovel, but she did. One of the legacies of her leadership is not only a water system infrastructure, but it is also seen in a community that came to understand that good leadership leads to good change.

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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?**

**LLO:** One key priority is to make a commitment to having an equitable classroom where you cannot be offensive... I encourage students to be mindful of how they are feeling. I explain to students that some of what they are going to study may challenge feelings and ideas that they have—and that I am not here to change their mind about anything. I am here to give them a broader sense of the world they live in. What they will read, think, and talk about



does not mean they have to absorb it and claim it as their own truth, but how we engage must be respectful... As instructors, the reason we are here is to share knowledge, expand understandings of the world we live in, and hopefully help refine who we are in that world, so that we can all engage within that world respectfully. We need to remember that we are human, and that people are struggling in ways that are pretty unprecedented in their own lives.

## 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, based on this interview:

- How are my colleagues and I evaluating what equity means in our work and what structural inequity means for our campus? Are there spaces on campus where we can collectively learn together?
- How can we individually, and together in trusted groups, take a step back and ask: What kind of campus and world are we trying to create? What do we want our legacy to be in terms of racial and other forms of equity in the pursuit of knowledge?
- How do I go about recognizing any preconceived notions that I may have about students and their communities? How do I regularly set aside time to listen to students and understand their experiences? How might I create assignments (or other interactions) in which students express themselves and I can hear where they are coming from and connect?
- Beyond the students that I interact with, how do I gather and share data about student populations and student experiences on my campus? Are there regular forums in my department or division for students to share their ideas and perspectives?
- How can I support my campus in having difficult and honest conversations about racism and other forms of structural inequities? Who are allies on campus in this endeavor? Are there regular forums for students to share their perspectives about structural inequities they face? How do faculty, staff, and administrators respond to these student concerns?
- In what ways can I meaningfully collaborate with others to understand and address inequities in my program, department, or campus? How can I support others in collaborating in these ways?



## Resource List

Dr. Lee-Oliver recommends these equity-minded resources for educators:

- Crenshaw, K. (2006). On intersectionality at WOW: Women of the world festival. [https://www.youtube.com/results?search\\_query=crenshaw+wow](https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=crenshaw+wow)
- Deloria Jr., V. & Wildcat, D. (2001). Power and place: Indian education in America. Fulcrum Publishing.
- Freire, P. (2000). Pedagogy of the oppressed. Bloomsbury Publishing, Inc.
- Hooks, B. (1994). Teaching to transgress. Routledge.
- Ignatiev, N. (2019, September 16). The point is not to interpret Whiteness but to abolish it. PM Press. <https://blog.pmpress.org/2019/09/16/the-point-is-not-to-interpret-whiteness-but-to-abolish-it/>
- Kasten, G.R. (2021, March 2). Overcoming obstacles to critical thinking. Edutopia. <https://www.edutopia.org/blog/critical-thinking-necessary-skill-g-randy-kasten>
- [The Foundation for Critical Thinking](#)
- Van Dernoot Lipsky, L. & Burk, C. (2009). Trauma stewardship: An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

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