



CSU Leaders Navigating the Pandemic and Racial Injustice

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September 2022


Abstract

The [California State University \(CSU\)](#) campuses, like many institutions, contended with the magnification of deep-rooted structural and social inequities when the COVID-19 pandemic and racial reckoning of May 2020 converged. In this research brief, we 1) present salient themes from across interviews with senior and middle leaders from seven CSU campuses about how they and their campuses responded, 2) draw comparative conclusions about responses to the pandemic and racial inequities, and 3) close the report with guiding questions to inform the actions of middle leaders to advance equity efforts on their campus, based on what we heard from those we interviewed. Notably, we found that interviewees reported increased communication and collaboration about equity and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, communication about the pandemic appeared more action-oriented than that about equity, perhaps because four campuses still had not reached a shared definition of equity. Interviewees described rapid and radical responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that such change is possible for CSU campuses, when there is urgency and a collective commitment to change. In contrast, descriptions of equity responses suggested these efforts were largely still in the planning stage, with fewer apparent or urgent actions reported compared to those reported for the pandemic. These findings highlight that campuses need to address equity with the same level of responsiveness and action-orientation with which they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Background Context

The confluence of two pandemics, COVID-19 and racial injustice, magnified deep-rooted structural and social inequities across many systems. COVID-19 caused major disruptions to education across the state and nationwide. This required the California State University (CSU) campuses to rapidly transition instruction and student services online. In the midst of these quick shifts, the murder of George Floyd by law enforcement highlighted longstanding inequities and forced the nation into a period of racial reckoning. While the CSU Chancellor's Office had prioritized equity through its [Graduation Initiative 2025](#) before the murder of George Floyd, the racial reckoning that began in May 2020 instilled a focus for CSU campuses to create more equity-centered institutions. Since the CSU serves a large, diverse student population, this watershed moment served as a call to action to better serve students in more equitable ways.¹

¹ In November 2021, the CSU Chancellor's Office released [Graduation 2025 Equity Goals and Priorities](#).



Through the research presented here, we sought to understand how CSU leaders navigated change in times of uncertainty on their campuses. Specifically, we explored how leaders responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and to the calls for racial justice. Below, we 1) present salient themes from across interviews with senior and middle leaders from seven campuses about how they and their campuses responded, 2) draw comparative conclusions about responses to the simultaneous pandemics, and 3) close the report with guiding questions that can inform the actions of middle leaders to advance equity efforts on their campus, based on what we heard from those we interviewed. While many leaders spoke about their campuses' COVID-19 pandemic response and equity efforts separately and we often present findings in that way below, an equity-minded approach must guide all actions for equity efforts to succeed.¹

Key Takeaways

- Interviewees reported increased communication and collaboration around equity and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, communication about the pandemic appeared more action-oriented than did communication about equity, perhaps because four campuses still had not reached a shared definition of equity.
- Interviewees described rapid and radical responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that such change is possible for CSU campuses when urgency and a collective commitment to change occur. In contrast, descriptions of equity responses suggested these efforts largely remained in the planning stage, with fewer apparent or urgent actions reported compared to those reported for the pandemic.

These findings highlight that campuses need to address equity with the same level of responsiveness and action-orientation with which they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

Communication and Planning

Challenges in defining and centering equity

Unlike the [California Community Colleges \(CCC\)](#),² the CSU did not have a standard expectation for campuses to create equity plans prior to the CSU Chancellor's Office [memo from November 2021](#). This memo outlined five equity priorities with actionable steps to close equity gaps in the system. That said, leaders from all of the campuses in our sample described ongoing equity efforts on their campuses, including defining equity, making equity statements, developing comprehensive equity plans, and engaging in ad-hoc or departmental equity efforts. Leaders from many campuses described centering their equity efforts through a lens of racial justice or disproportionate racial impact. However, there were variations in how campuses defined and operationalized equity. Interviewees from more than half of campuses noted a lack of cohesion in equity definitions or operationalizations on their campus and associated challenges.

² The CCC Board of Governors adopted an equity policy in 1991 and in 1992 amended the policy to require colleges adopt a student equity plan for receipt of state funding. See Compton College's [historical overview on the student equity programs](#).



Method

We selected a sample of campuses that varied in characteristics such as region, enrollment size, percent of traditionally underserved students, and percent of Pell Grant recipients. We recruited leaders for semi-structured interviews in fall 2020 and spring 2021.

The sample included 18 interviewees representing seven campuses. Participants included a mix of senior-level administrators (e.g., vice presidents [VPs] of both student and academic affairs, provosts) and middle leaders (e.g., associate deans, directors).

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. We used inductive thematic coding to identify patterns across the data.^v

Given a shared equity definition and associated operationalization is foundational for moving institutional equity efforts forward,ⁱⁱ the data suggests these four campuses were in fairly early stages of equity work.


For campuses where equity definitions centered on racial justice, equity efforts focused on antiracism by examining and dismantling campus policies and practices that systematically benefit White people and disadvantage Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC) individuals, while intentionally focusing on better supporting Black students. For campuses where equity definitions centered on disproportionate impact for students of color, equity efforts focused on the importance of recognizing “disproportionate harms” and providing “disproportionate remedies” to counteract and close equity gaps in opportunity (e.g., access, recruitment) and achievement (e.g., retention, graduation). In some instances, the definitions that focused on disproportionate impacts extended beyond those in education and referenced the impact of the pandemic on communities of color and low-income communities.

For some campuses, senior leadership quickly aligned equity work with the May 2020 racial reckoning. Other campuses took a little longer to release statements in the wake of social unrest.

We had already been planning on a convocation that we had had dialogue about, and we had been in the context of planning for some time the thoughtfulness of when we're ready as a campus, how we're ready as a campus. And we pivoted, though. What it looked like initially in January of 2020, by April, May of 2020, what we were planning for Fall 2020 was different. At first, we were talking a lot about just racial justice more prominently and more generally, without being specific. Then there was a bit of a focus on the impact for the Asian American community, and then we were also having a particular focus on being very clear about antiracism and a little less inclusion and belonging, more generally and less intentionally.

Upward Bound put out their statement to their students, and EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] put out, and the statewide EOP, and you know, certainly I put out something, because I [lead our university diversity body]. I put out something to them. There was a lot of that kind of activity going on. But the campus response took a little longer, because, as you know, everybody's looking for what's coming from the campus. What's coming from the President. ... So, you have to be a little bit more cautious. So, it took a little more time to put something out. And our President is very committed to diversity.

However, leaders across four campuses noted a lack of cohesion in the campus definition of equity. These leaders described how lacking coalescence around an equity definition or operationalization presents challenges with and/or resistance to taking responsibility for undertaking addressing equity.



But I don't know if there is a consistent feel about what equity means on our campus. You know, if you stop anybody on our campus, students, administrators, faculty, I don't think you would get a consistent definition of what equity means, not only equity as a societal concern but equity in our campus environment.

Navigating conversations and planning

Nearly all leaders described the pivotal role that either senior leadership and/or middle leaders across the campus play in moving equity efforts forward. Some of these leaders described the role of intentional signaling from top leaders about the importance of racial justice and the campus' commitment to antiracism in setting the tone and galvanizing change. Many leaders also highlighted the importance of collaboration and communication in addressing structural racism and pandemic-induced uncertainty.

Diffusion of equity planning

Leaders from about half of the campuses included in our sample described framing equity efforts as collaborative efforts that require representation from all constituency groups. Leaders from most of the campuses described the creation of equity-focused cross-role task forces or workgroups. Leaders also described the creation of faculty affinity groups that focused on racial equity and taking actionable steps toward antiracism. Efforts to do this included examining whether students have been acknowledged and treated equitably, examining microaggressions, and engaging in strategic planning focused on providing solutions to address systemic racial oppression on the campus. Examples of specific actions taken to address racial inequity are described in the [next section](#).

[Our campus] has taken on a... diversity, equity, and inclusion strategic planning process ... a lot of times, when we talk about diversity, equity, and inclusion, there's a tendency to talk about everything but race and racial injustice, and then, to think-- to brainstorm and organize solutions that address systemic racial oppression. [The] process is seeking to center racism and antiracism in everything it does...[and then] beginning the process of implementation of the recommendations ... So, there's this institutional process, and I'm also seeing antiracism planning retreats, statements, and localized planning processes coming out of different departments, colleges, different groups on campus. So, you're seeing not just this overall planning process, but then folks are, within their local spaces, taking it upon themselves to go through localized processes.

The interviewees who spoke on equity efforts as collaborative described empowerment that middle leaders can act upon to advance equity from within their roles when senior leaders:

- lift up middle leaders' voices and ensure they are heard;
- create a climate of trust and respect; and
- grant middle leaders autonomy to act and implement equity changes from within their position within the institution.

The role that comes to mind first is the department chair and their ability to make change happen along the lines that we've been discussing is chiefly in student success and in hiring lecturers, and in those two areas, they're really all we have. I mean, when you say, "What is the role of middle leadership in addressing these things?" They write the class schedules, they're the ones who can sequence the curriculum and make sure that the difficult classes are appropriately supported with prerequisites. They're the ones who can diversify the faculty first. There's a lot we count on them for.



Impediments to equity progress

Nonetheless, nearly half of the colleges discussed challenges with the ability to sustain and continue making progress on their equity efforts. Challenges include a lack of clarity and communication about what their colleagues are implementing, and difficulty obtaining convergence—within departments, across divisions, campus-wide—on how to move these efforts forward. Moreover, some leaders described resistance to ownership of and accountability for engaging in equity work; challenges with changing mindset (e.g., deficit thinking); struggles to decenter whitenessⁱⁱⁱ (e.g., in curriculum, hiring) and center faculty and staff voices, specifically the voices of people of color and non-male personnel; and difficulties with creating a sense of safety and trust among colleagues to collaboratively engage in diversity, equity, and inclusion learning and efforts.

... When I show people data, people have to believe what they're seeing. What I often get is people push back on the data itself. They get engaged in these questions about methodology, about what might be some other confounding variables. But how about just looking at the story itself as it presents to you? Why are we seeing equity gaps in every class? Right. There must be something going on. Instead of questioning that and trying not to believe that, believe it first I think would be a great mindset change as well ... There's a level of fragility, right, and to be confronted with truths in terms of information and in the form of data, the pushback comes from the fragility. Because the fragility, the information can be perceived as an indictment, right? And one is fragile to that indictment. So the easier thing to do would be to maybe even subconsciously to deflect, to pick apart, to "de-truth" if I can make up a word. But that's all a protective measure to protect against the fragility that gets provoked from those truths.

Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic


Most leaders also described increases in collaborative planning and decision-making around the COVID-19 pandemic. Some campus leaders described the formation of new cross-divisional, cross-role planning teams composed of members of various campus constituency groups, including students. For example, some of these groups were charged with determining how to communicate decisions to the campus community or which courses or labs submitted by faculty and department chairs for in-person exceptions would permit in-person instruction, based on classroom space and social distancing requirements.

We had a process for the fall where we, the deans in all the colleges and all of the chairs of the departments and the faculty, ... select[ed] which classes absolutely needed to be taught in person. ... and then this whole panel worked on it. ... It was an advisory group where there were different committees and they had people [who] were students, faculty, people from Academic Senate, administrators, [specific working group].

This collaborative planning was paired with additional, or expanded, communications among colleagues and with students at nearly all of the campuses.

Many leaders described increased communication and collaboration among colleagues, particularly with regards to the decision to go virtual, the plans to protect the community, and the strategies to communicate with the campus community. This involved frequent communication and meetings among executive leadership.

We met very, very often. And it got to this point where we were meeting every single morning from 8:00 to 10:00 with the [President's] Cabinet. And then I met with the deans three times a week for two-hour meetings and with my associate vice presidents twice a week. So we met ... every single day we were meeting with somebody for a couple hours trying to prepare for this.



Many leaders also described more frequent communication across constituencies (e.g., senates, unions, middle leaders) and new communication methods, such as regular Q&A sessions. For instance, one leader said, “I know that there continues to be a lot of outreach ... through academic affairs to the faculty and beyond to really talk about how we are navigating this together, what resources are out there.” Leaders we spoke to described using surveys of faculty and staff to determine what supports they needed at the start of the pandemic, and to assess how things had gone in spring 2020 and what had been most helpful.

Similarly, leaders also described using surveys and focus groups to assess student needs and how things were going. Interviewees described intentional and ongoing messaging and outreach to students to inform them of changes and resources, and also to check in and provide proactive advising through a variety of channels. For instance, some described using new technologies (e.g., chat bots, email, Twitter, Instagram), setting up town halls, and/or creating FAQs to intentionally share information with students. One respondent noted, “We were doing a lot of town halls, we had all these FAQs, we’re sending out emails, our advisors are doing check-in sessions with students, and of course, they’re addressing whatever’s coming up.”

While there were reported increases in communication and collaboration around both equity and responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, such communication and collaboration appeared more action-oriented for the pandemic response. This may be, in part, because taking action around equity requires a shared definition and commitment^{iv} and lacking a shared definition emerged as an ongoing challenge for more than half of the campuses. While the pandemic response also required communication and collaboration, the nature of that crisis may have fueled more immediate action. The next section describes specific actions taken to address racial inequities and the pandemic.


Addressing Racial Inequities and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Identifying and addressing racial inequities

Leaders from across campuses identified a number of inequities that result from campus and classroom policies and practices. Specifically, they described inequities relating to hiring and retention, course curriculum, student access and outcomes, and campus climate.

Leaders from six of the seven campuses described inequities in hiring and retention. They described faculty and administration at their campuses as not reflective of the diverse student body the campuses serve. One respondent said, “Our faculty do not reflect the diversity of our campus, neither do our administrators.” Leaders across these campuses described the need for recruitment practices that create more diverse applicant pools (e.g., advertise positions to candidates from marginalized backgrounds) and for refining the formalized retention, tenure, promotion (RTP) structures to recognize the service faculty of color do in mentoring students of color.

So these are things that are being talked about, but I haven't seen any action in this area. Someone said to me just the other day that every single faculty of color that's hired on this campus becomes the keeper of the hopes and dreams of all students of color, and what that means is that what departments, what both faculty of color and then diversity leadership on our campus is trying to help departments understand is that it doesn't matter if faculty of color are trying to sit there and focus on their scholarship. These students are going to find them, and they're going to need mentorship. They're going to need care, and that labor is not recognized anywhere in our evaluation of faculty performance. It doesn't even qualify as service within the RTP process because it's informal, as you said, or it feels informal, but it actually takes a lot of labor and time and effort, and so I think that is something that is not being-it's being talked about a lot, but most of that conversation is by faculty of color who have been talking about what they call cultural taxation for a very long time. I don't really see any movement.



Leaders from five of the seven campuses described their current efforts to overhaul recruitment, hiring, and retention practices to support a diverse faculty and staff body. These efforts included anti-bias training, equity/diversity advocacy, advertising, ensuring diverse hiring pools, and creating a public facing tool to see the diversity of faculty/staff, which some noted was already in progress when the summer 2020 racial reckoning began.

It may have just accelerated things we were already working on, a little like the paperless processes thing, but we already, when we do faculty searches, do implicit bias training. ... Then we do a check with all the finalists just for diversity. ... Like, we'll do what we can to sort of re-level the playing field. But we were already doing that too. You know, I think it was a reminder that what we're doing, we still have to do, more than I think [it was] an impetus for new work.

Along with this, leaders from most campuses described seeing inequities manifest within the classroom via course curriculum (e.g., Eurocentric content) as well as in students' transition to a virtual learning environment (e.g., accessing technology, lacking a physical place to study, accessing or receiving information about helpful resources, understanding the academic language/jargon used by faculty). Beyond discussion on this issue, interviewees did not report actions to remedy the problem.

But how we produce knowledge within higher education, which will have an effect on how we're teaching students and the kind of educational experience that they're having, the kind of curriculum that they're exposed to, which currently are still extremely Eurocentric in all aspects, and so that's the work that I hope is going to continue, because that's what's going to get us to that transformational space.


Leaders from five campuses described how student access and outcomes and/or campus climate show evidence of inequities. Most leaders described the positive effects that creating a welcoming campus climate could have on student outcomes. Leaders described seeing racial equity gaps in both the passing rates of students in their first and second year, as well as the four-year graduation rates.³

So we've done a lot of investment in data analysis. So we've learned, for instance, that our underrepresented minority equity gap is almost completely accounted for by non-passing grades in the first two years. So it's specific courses with very high DFW rates at the 100 and 200 level. If we could close those gaps, our equity gaps would go away.

The devil is in the details for us. Like, why is our ... our first time, first year student graduation rate is 12% in four years. That's not unusual across the CSU. The CSU as a whole has a problem and it's really bad, especially for underrepresented students ... And oftentimes, what I've heard is like, "Well, our students are different. They have different needs." Right. "How are we then changing to address those needs?" And I never get a good answer to that.

Leaders from most colleges said cultivating a sense of belonging could improve the retention and graduation of traditionally underserved students. They expressed the need for faculty to convey a welcoming campus climate in their classroom (e.g., by validating these students rather than tokenizing them, by learning how to respond to racism within the classroom). Creating this sense of belonging was one of the challenges leaders most frequently mentioned to making progress on their campuses' equity efforts. Half of the campuses described difficulties with keeping students engaged and feeling connected to the campus in the virtual learning environment (e.g., engaging in online

³ As part of [Graduation Initiative 2025](#), campuses are expected to attend to these gaps.



learning, Zoom fatigue, navigating commencement and other recognitions of students' achievements) and difficulties with building and maintaining relationships—among students, faculty, and staff—in the context of the pandemic.

If it's not a welcoming, inclusive environment culturally, then that itself can really threaten [that] sense of belonging and all that comes along with feeling like you belong, that opens up thriving, that opens up engagement. It opens so many doors. But if you're not welcome in the first place or if you don't feel that, if the culture isn't designed to demonstrate that, then there's that. So the sense of belonging is important too.

Leaders from nearly all of the campuses in our sample spoke to racial equity-focused professional development, which was not always described as being tailored to address the inequities mentioned above. Some of the professional development opportunities described included hosting:

- department chair-led trainings on classroom strategies to support students of color;
- learning communities about antiracism for campus personnel;
- faculty-based summer boot camps with ongoing seminars/workshops during the academic year that addressed racial equity and implicit bias in teaching, especially online; and
- training for newly hired faculty on equity-minded pedagogy to overcome issues of microaggressions in the classroom identified by students.

Identifying and addressing COVID-19 related needs


Pivoting to virtual and paperless formats

Campuses made quick pivots from in-person instruction, student support services, and administrative processes to virtual formats, with leaders from five out of seven campuses describing this process. For some, these changes were smooth and thought out prior to March 2020. Prior shutdowns due to the impacts of wildfire gave some campuses experience with [being nimble in times of uncertainty](#) that they drew on when navigating their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. For others, the transitions were rocky. In some instances, this rockiness was due to lack of experience with virtual learning and student supports. Other campuses experienced piece-meal transitions, with some units returning to campus after the initial shift to remote and then going back off site while others remained remote despite leadership calls to return to campus. Leaders reported variability in familiarity with platforms like Zoom and Canvas, both within and across campuses, that impacted the fluidity of the transition.

Leaders described radical shifts from almost entirely in-person instruction to entirely online instruction. One respondent said, “On the pandemic front, we went from about five percent of classes offered online to 95 percent offered online. It was 100 percent online in the second half of spring 2020... So the single biggest response to the pandemic was that.”

Pivots were also made to student support services, such as tutoring, mentoring, and advising. Many leaders reported that student affairs quickly shifted to support centers (e.g., writing centers, career centers) offering services virtually. With regard to advising, some leaders reported more attendance for online advising events, and that they were hearing from students that online advising and mental health services worked better for them.

Another large shift spurred by the pandemic was the pivot away from paper forms, a process met with resistance before COVID-19. Interviewees from most campuses mentioned that prior to the pandemic, their campuses required hard copies of documents to be ferried from person-to-person for



wet signatures. Leaders reported that paper forms were time consuming—students could not always find the necessary offices/people—and inefficient—paper forms got lost. However, the pandemic forced campuses to transition to the widespread use of paperless forms for both student-facing paperwork (e.g., major declaration, course withdrawal forms) and internal paperwork (e.g., grade change, tenure and promotion paperwork). Online tools, such as Adobe Sign, allowed students to initiate and track the progress of their forms.

We've had a lot of paper forms. You know, and they were like—they get lost. Everyone knows that. Now, almost all of our processes that are student-centered have gone into Adobe Sign, so the students can initiate it, and they [can] see exactly where it's going. What a thought! They see exactly when it goes to the Registrar's and is processed. ... We were moving in that direction. I think if anything, the racial injustice, COVID, historical election—it catalyzed a lot of processes that we were going toward to reduce the barriers for students, undergrads at [campus]. But it just catalyzed it, because we had no choice.

Increased flexibility and accessibility


While some leaders surfaced challenges with communicating about and providing for student needs in an online learning environment, as well as struggling to foster equitable learning and equitable classrooms in a virtual environment, leaders from most of the campuses in our sample described increases in the flexibility of policies and accessibility of services, resources, and education. With regard to flexibility, campus leaders described shifts in course and grading policies. For example, the leaders we spoke to reported longer course drop windows, additional grading flexibility (e.g., credit/no credit, ABC, pass/fail), and the removal of barriers for students (e.g., registration holds for small outstanding balances). Specifically, one respondent relayed, “Grading ... is one of the areas where we have made changes because we felt like students needed more opportunities to drop courses or they needed more flexibility in being able to take a class credit/no credit or A, B, C, Pass/Fail.”

They also described flexibility in expectations and assessments at the classroom level, inclusion of more information about student resources in syllabi at the campus level, and the systemwide move to not require SAT scores for 2021 applicants.

With regard to expanding accessibility of student support services, leaders reported institutional changes such as expanded hours, free virtual orientation, virtual one-stop student help centers, and holistic consideration of students' circumstances. For instance, without the constraints of staffing a physical building, campuses could provide virtual services outside of normal business hours by staggering staff hours. At one campus, they found this change increased access of advising services by students who were less likely to access in-person advising, most notably Black students.

Leaders from several campuses described creating a virtual one-stop student help center where students can centrally access resources and/or forms. They also described efforts to personally and proactively connect with students who showed signs of struggling in their courses or who did not re-enroll in the new semester. Some campuses leveraged early alert systems through which faculty and staff can refer students they think may need resources and proactive advising. One leader shared, “the registrar every week gives us a list of students who withdraw from ... one or more courses and then advising staff is actually reaching out to them to ask if they need any support ... We're trying to be much more proactive in our advising work.”

Leaders from more than half of the campuses in our sample also reported increased consideration of students' circumstances and increased efforts to ensure access to what they need to progress. For example, students with siblings or children may not have space to study, some share computers or have no computers with which to complete coursework, and students with disabilities may experience barriers to accessing virtual classrooms. Campuses demonstrated creative ways



in meeting students where they were at. For example, offering non-academic programming to bring students together virtually to foster connection, hosting president or deans' office hours where students and parents could ask questions, and providing an array of synchronous and asynchronous courses.

Addressing needs, while attending to equity

Leaders from all of the campuses in our sample described efforts to provide additional resources—for basic needs, technology, financial support—to meet their students' needs and provide additional support for their personnel during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. A few leaders also highlighted the importance of intentional allocation of resources—both funding and staffing—to support equity efforts, and described how their campuses continued to support in these areas.

If you want to know what the institution is committed to, follow the money.

You know, we're in some tough times right now about budget and it would be really easy to say, "All of us have to take a hit right now around staff or budget." And because of our strong leadership in saying, "No, we've got a lot of work to do for diversity and inclusion and racial justice on our campus, we're not going to take any funds or staffing or resources right now away from that area," that's a strong leader.


With regard to basic needs, campuses continued providing students with access to food, with some campuses directing students to local food banks and others maintaining their on-campus food pantries by setting up safe food pickup on campus. Some leaders also described increased mental health support. They discussed the actions taken—communicating resources to faculty and students, providing strategies for how faculty can support students' in addressing particular needs, faculty incorporating check-ins into their class—to resolve or assist students, staff, and faculty in navigating challenges associated with mental health. For faculty of color, interviewees described the added challenge and increased stress of cultural taxation for which leaders did not describe actions taken to respond to this particular challenge.

There's this concept called "cultural taxation," ... [it's the] ... hidden work that many scholars and people of color on campuses do. It's like that hidden work that no one sees. No one rewards it. They don't know about the 3:00 A.M. calls, or the extra advising sessions that many of us may do, or the letters of recommendations we get asked to do, because there's so few of us. And so, what are ways that we can reward some of that cultural taxation, or that unrewarded, unseen work that happens, that's really supporting Black students and other students of color, but often goes missed, and not rewarded, or not promoted.

About half of leaders reported providing technology to students, faculty, and staff, including loaner laptops, hotspots, headsets, cameras, and microphones. In addition, some campuses established parking lot WiFi to enable students without reliable access to the internet to park and work from their cars.

Yeah, digital equity is a huge piece. It is something that's on my mind all the time, because there are aspects of it we have control over, and there are aspects of it we just don't have control over. Where we do have control is trying to find out who needs what and providing students with those tools, so we have a loan program for laptops, and it counts as part of the cost of instruction so that the students—it's covered by their financial aid. We have been loaning-out hotspots to students, and that has been the bigger demand, it seems.

A few leaders described providing additional financial support to students through allocating Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act money directly to students; supplementing



with other funds to support those who were ineligible for federal monies (e.g., international students, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival [DACA] students); and, for at least one campus, refunding certain fees to students.

Leaders from almost all of the campuses in the study reported increased professional development and training for personnel in the context of the pandemic. Most leaders described faculty professional development that focused on online teaching, including training on both technological and pedagogical elements. As one leader put it, they, “created a whole training for our faculty to engage them in how to have both inclusive classrooms in a virtual way, [and] how to use the technology.” Some also described other teaching-related professional development focused on providing caring, communicative, and/or accessible online learning experiences. Some leaders described staff professional development opportunities as well, or professional development offered to staff and faculty together.

As noted by interviewees, CSU campuses—like many large institutions—often struggle with change. However, the reported rapid and radical responses to the COVID-19 pandemic serve as evidence that such change is possible for CSU campuses, when there both urgency and a collective commitment to change. Respondents described more apparent and rapid actions in response to the pandemic compared to the efforts around equity.


Looking Ahead

In many instances, leaders described how changes made out of necessity because of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to the realization that these new processes are actually better for students and university personnel. For example, some leaders described findings on their campus that more students, particularly Black students, accessed virtual advising services as compared to in-person services during the same time period in the prior year. More students, particularly Black and Latinx students, attended free virtual orientation than in prior years when there was a cost for in-person orientation. Some leaders we spoke with also shared that personnel on their campuses saw benefits to the pandemic-induced changes. For example, noting the increased convenience and efficiency to advise students virtually, and seeing more equitable meeting participation via Zoom versus being in a room where not everyone can see one another. Most campuses in our sample intended to maintain hybrid options for courses and student services, continue paperless forms, and continue cross-functional collaboration even after the pandemic ends.

The shifts that have been made in response to the pandemic have led leaders in this study to question, “things that we’ve just always done ... that way.” While some in the CSU are calling for a return to “normal,” many of the leaders we spoke to encouraged a thoughtful examination of how things are done and whom it does and does not benefit.

The adaptations that people have had to make have not been huge, but reticence towards any and all change is very strong in large institutions. And so, even if we know something is not working well, we stick with it, oftentimes, because it’s already there. And I think the pandemic has forced everyone to rethink their practices. And I hope that continues, honestly, that forced reflection turns into a more proactive reflection.

In the context of equity, these lasting changes remain especially important. Longstanding policies and practices remain responsible for the persistent racial inequities in education that disproportionately affect BIPOC. Our interviews suggested that at some campuses, equity efforts largely still centered on strategic planning, communications, and professional development. Reform related to hiring, retention, and promotion had some traction. In most cases, reported equity impacts occurred as a



byproduct of pandemic-driven shifts rather than at the center of leading changes at the campuses. Campuses should take efforts to understand the equity implications and impacts of these pandemic-related changes as part of their ongoing equity efforts. While many interviewees spoke of pandemic-related changes and equity efforts separately, some explicitly noted connections between the two. More than that, campuses need to address equity with the same level of responsiveness and action-orientation with which they responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Guiding Questions for Advancing Campus Equity Conversations and Action

To support campuses' ongoing efforts to recover from the pandemic and institutionalize comprehensive equity efforts, we offer a set of guiding questions aligned with our interview findings. Campus conversations and planning that result from engaging these questions must generate concrete actions, measurable outcomes, and finite timelines for (re)assessing and (re)calibrating action.

Communication and planning

- Define and operationalize equity:
 - How does our campus define and operationalize equity? Is there campus cohesion around an equity definition? What steps will our campus take to increase cohesion around the definition and operationalization of equity?
- Maintain communication:
 - How is our commitment to campus equity communicated within leadership, across divisions and departments, and with students? How does our campus talk about equity and equity efforts? What are the strategies for maintaining and/or further developing this communication across groups?
 - In what ways is the campus communicating pandemic-related changes with students and across other groups?
 - How will we assess the effectiveness of our communication of equity and pandemic-related changes within leadership, across divisions and departments, and with students?

Actions to address racial inequities and the COVID-19 pandemic

- Identify and address racial inequities and emergent needs:
 - Is our campus using disaggregated data to address inequities in *hiring and retention* across the campus and within departments and divisions? How is the campus community engaging in discussions about these data? How can our campus routinely share and examine hiring and retention data and strategies to continue making progress to close these equity gaps?
 - Is our campus using disaggregated data to identify inequities in *student access and outcomes* across the campus, within departments, courses, instructors, and across divisions? How is the campus community engaging in discussions about these data? How will our campus routinely share and examine access and outcomes data and strategies to continue making progress to close these equity gaps?
 - What is our *curriculum* like in terms of representation? How, and how often, do we assess this? How can our campus improve representation in curriculum?



- What is our *campus climate* like for staff, faculty, and students? How, and how often, do we assess this? How can our campus use this information to identify strategies and actions to address climate issues?
 - How is our campus thinking about and communicating efforts to reduce cultural taxation, microaggressions, and inequities experienced by BIPOC personnel and students?
 - In what ways is the campus communicating with students, faculty, and staff to assess basic needs and provide relevant support? Are there opportunities to engage in professional development trainings that support me and/or my colleagues to increase or improve our efforts towards meeting students' needs?
 - Are there opportunities to engage in professional development trainings that support me and/or my colleagues to increase or improve our efforts towards creating an antiracist institution?
- Retain flexibility and accessibility:
 - How, and with what frequency, is our campus using disaggregated data to identify disproportionate impacts in the outcomes of existing and new policies (i.e., institutional, departmental, and teaching)? How is the campus community engaging in discussions about these data? Are data on equity gaps by faculty member, department, or college/division published? How can we ensure policy impacts are examined routinely and across divisions/departments to continue making progress to close equity gaps? What strategies are in place for revising policies that result in disproportionate impacts?
 - How is our campus assessing the equity impacts of the changes to *institutional policies and practice* introduced in response to the pandemic? Based on those findings, which of these changes should our campus maintain as we return to “normal operations?” What opportunities exist to expand upon pandemic-related changes to better support students, specifically underserved students? How can we routinely examine institutional policies and practices to better understand how they impact students with particular attention to reducing equity gaps among student groups? Using these data, how can we re-approach institutional policies and practices to make them more flexible and student-centered?
 - How can we routinely examine *departmental and teaching policies and practices* to better understand how they are impacting students? Using course and department data, how can we re-approach departmental and teaching policies and practices to make them more equitable, flexible, and student-centered?



Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the leaders at the seven participating California State University campuses who took part in the interviews. Without their participation, this study would not have been possible. We appreciate the assistance of the administrators and staff who helped facilitate our research on their campus. We are grateful to Andrea Venezia for her work originating the study idea, developing the interview protocol, and conducting interviews. We appreciate Jaqueline Caro-Sena's support with conducting interviews. Bianca Mothe, Dylan Lohmeyer, Larissa Mercado-Lopez, LeAnn Fong-Batkin, Mary Virnoche, Shonda Goward, Thad Nodine and Victoria Bhavsar helped to inform and improve our drafts. We appreciate the editorial assistance of Rebecca K. Woolston and Kalifa Madden, the layout work by Pat Davis Design Group, and review for Americans with Disabilities Act Compliance by Access Ingenuity. Finally, this research study was inspired by [UC Davis Wheelhouse](#) research, specifically two research briefs: [Turning on a Dime](#) and [Toward a More Perfect Institution](#).



Endnotes

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