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To: CSU Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

**From: Keena P. Walters and Jaquelyn Caro-Sena,
CSU Student Success Network**

**Topic: Supporting Black Students in the CSU through
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, Representation, and
Respect**

With the recent calls for racial justice across the country, institutions of higher education in California were forced to reflect on their own practices and policies and commit to better serve students of color, particularly Black students. In May 2020, the California State University (CSU) Chancellor's Office, under the leadership of former Chancellor Dr. Timothy P. White, released a [Call for Unity and Reunification](#) and later that year reaffirmed the system's [commitment to diversity and inclusion](#). These responses both inspired and reflected similar actions taken by CSU campuses in which they released statements affirming that Black lives matter and acknowledging the devastating effects of police brutality and racial injustices for communities of color. Some campuses also went further by creating commitment statements or action plans and announcing them publicly. Through these action plans, some colleges laid out strategies to improve their equity efforts on campus. Research shows that these efforts are long overdue and are critical to address significant and persistent equity gaps in the CSU for Black students.¹ As such, it is important that the CSU and its campuses not only acknowledge the existence of racial inequities, but also take action to address these inequities to better support Black students.

This Knowledge Center memo is one in a series created by the [CSU Student Success Network \(Network\)](#). The Knowledge Center is an online resource created by the Network that provides 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 Network serves CSU faculty, staff, administrators, and students to advance equitable student learning, engagement, progression, and success. It is facilitated by the [Education Insights Center](#) at [Sacramento State](#), an independent research and policy center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education.



As a result of the recent actions taken by the CSU, this memo seeks to further those conversations by providing additional ways the CSU can reduce equity gaps. To address these overall aims, this memo shares three key findings from the research regarding supporting Black students on college and university campuses. First, access to culturally relevant pedagogy improves students' sense of belonging on campus and their outcomes.² However, many Black students are not experiencing culturally relevant teaching strategies within their courses. Second, Black students need access to Black faculty and staff to whom they feel connected; current data show that Black faculty are underrepresented in universities.^{3,4} Third, students need to feel welcome and valued on college or university campuses.^{5,6,7} Rather than feeling valued, Black students often feel disrespected in campus settings. Addressing these issues for students of color, and particularly for Black students, is critical if the CSU and its campuses are serious about eliminating their equity gaps. Such steps will not only create an equitable CSU system, but also an equitable society, by providing social mobility for the populations of students who have been drastically affected by years of exclusionary educational policies and practices.

Key Findings from the Literature

Black students need regular, ongoing access to culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy.

Culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy focuses on students' cultural identity development and critical thinking. The infusion of culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy into a school's course offerings and instructional delivery positively influences the student success outcomes for Black undergraduates. Culturally relevant curriculum that offers validation and representation to Black students, by contrast, has many benefits, including improving student engagement and student outcomes.⁸ In a study of Black undergraduate students at an urban university in the West, researchers found that the students see "very little of themselves in course readings and classroom discussions."⁹ Participants in the study shared that they want to experience a curriculum that is inclusive of Black history, culture, and voices more prominently.¹⁰ Similarly, another study about the resilience and success of Black students under duress described the students as "feeling left out due to the lack of representation of Black people in the course material."¹¹ Black students in the study stated that when they could see the contributions of Black people in the curriculum they were more invested.¹² Curriculum in higher education that is centered on Whiteness serves to sustain White supremacy, and Black scholars have suggested that most curricula in higher education is centered on Whiteness.^{13,14}



Black students also deserve culturally relevant pedagogy. In the study mentioned above about Black students' resilience and success, 56 percent of Black students said they wanted access to more equitable and responsive instructional strategies.¹⁵ For example, they said they wanted exposure to more diverse teaching styles, including “more hands-on learning assignments, more community engaging assignments, and the opportunity for discussion.”¹⁶ After a lifetime of experience in the education system, these students have specific and concrete knowledge about how they learn best.¹⁷

An example of culturally relevant practices can be found at the California community colleges in programs such as [Umoja](#). The Umoja program supports Black student success at the community colleges by providing a curriculum inclusive of culturally relevant practices representative of the legacy, culture, and history of the African Diaspora.¹⁸ Researchers found that Black students who participated in an Umoja program, compared with similar groups of peers from the same college: earned more units; completed first-year coursework at higher rates; persisted at higher rates; completed English and math courses at higher rates; and were more likely to earn a Chancellor award, a degree or an Associate Degree for Transfer (ADT), and achieve transfer-ready status.¹⁹ Umoja students said that they were successful partly because their curriculum was designed specifically for Black students.²⁰ An example of student success programs that provide tailored support for Black students at the CSU include the [Sankofa Scholars Program at CSU East Bay](#) which is the first and only affiliate of the Umoja program that incorporates the Umoja principles in its programming.

The following suggestions, drawn from the research, may help CSU faculty support Black students' success:

- Intentionally include contributions of Black scholars in the curriculum.
- Use culturally relevant books, articles, and journals (for example, readings by and about Black authors and those that include the perspectives of Black people).
- Create lessons that feature hands-on applications, community engagement, and discussions (see the Resources section for additional examples of CSU student success programs that tailor their services to Black students).

Black students need universities to hire and retain more Black faculty and staff.

A growing body of literature suggests that a diverse faculty and staff can help to improve student success.²¹ This means that universities need to have faculty that are representative of their student populations. Black students, for example, develop a stronger sense of belonging when they can identify with their mentors, faculty, staff, and campus leaders.²² For example, in the study on Black student engagement, Black students “identified Black faculty as key sources of guidance, motivation, and a sense of family on campus” and said that “low numbers of Black professors on campus make it difficult for them to feel comfortable.”²³ This study found that having Black faculty



and staff present on campuses helped to promote a sense of belonging among Black students by providing “a sense of hope and validation of their academic identity at the university.”²⁴

According to a national study by the Pew Research Center in 2019, about 6 percent of postsecondary faculty members in the U.S. are Black, compared with 14 percent of undergraduates.²⁵ Studies show that undergraduate students have reported experiencing a “shortage of professors of color, particularly Black faculty.”²⁶ Even the study of Umoja, described above, recommended that the program hire additional faculty and staff of color to support Black community college students.²⁷ Data on Black students, and lack of diversity among faculty and staff in the CSU, echo the lack of Black faculty and staff in the country. As of fall 2020, across the CSU system only 4 percent of all CSU students (485,550) identified as Black.²⁸ Additionally alarming is the low number of Black faculty and staff across the CSU system. Only 7.1 percent of all staff (20,037) and 4.4 percent of all instructional faculty (26,934) identified as Black.²⁹ While the faculty and staff percentages vary by campus, these numbers indicate that there are very few Black faculty and staff available to serve Black students across the CSU.

Hiring more Black faculty provides a positive campus environment for Black students and creates a supportive community environment for other Black faculty.³⁰ Black scholars have been stepping forward to discuss and document the extent to which microaggressions and exclusionary practices and policies impact Black faculty members as well as Black students when navigating higher education spaces.³¹ They have described the prevalence of exclusionary practices, behaviors, and forms of engagement in colleges in the following ways:

- persistent questions that serve to undermine the forms of scholarship and leadership that are valued among Black faculty;
- the use and exploitation of Black faculty for pictures and marketing purposes, while paying them less and limiting their tenure opportunities;
- the appropriation of Black scholarship and history, while also discrediting Black scholarship and history;
- interactions with colleagues who fall back on stereotypes in assuming Black people are aggressive, discussing their hair, or calling them by their first name instead of using their doctoral title; and
- the devaluation of Black scholarship and publications because their citations refer to other Black scholars or a Historically Black College or University.³²

In the wake of anti-Black racism, violence, and murder, members of the California Faculty Association called for their administrations to 1) reallocate funds from policing to “Black and Ethnic Studies along with targeted hiring of Black faculty so that faculty diversity reflects the CSU student body diversity,” and 2) increase “diversity among administration as a way to begin to better support Black faculty.”³³



Institutions that are seeking to ensure that their Black students succeed need to improve their diversification practices. CSU campuses might consider these suggestions from the research literature:

- Train hiring committee members on racial biases and stereotypes and ensure that committee members provide diverse and unique perspectives.³⁴
- Revise job listings to remove potential biases and ensure that the listings are posted in an array of places where people of color may have access to them.³⁵
- Review and reform existing practices that perpetuate cultural taxation on faculty and staff of color.³⁶
- Ensure that faculty and staff of color receive equitable pay and tenure opportunities.³⁷

Black students need respect.

Black students want to be accepted and respected as members of their campus community, inclusive of faculty, staff, and their peers.^{38,39,40} Research shows that Black students have experienced hostile and isolating campus climates where they feel undervalued and as outsiders. Black students want to be respected by universities, all campus faculty and staff, and other students. This means being supportive and inclusive on university campuses, recognizing the value and assets of Black students, acknowledging their input in classrooms, and valuing their abilities. Research shows many examples of the ways that Black students feel disrespected on university campuses, including through persistent microaggressions.⁴¹ Experiencing microaggressions and other forms of disrespect makes students feel like they are not welcome on campus. Racial microaggressions are troublesome because they perpetuate institutional racism and further create obstacles for students of color such as Black undergraduates.⁴² A study about Black men's perceptions of belonging on campus found that when these men perceived that faculty were drawing from racial and gender stereotypes in interacting with them, they were less likely to report a sense of belonging with these faculty.⁴³ Examples given in another study share some of the microaggressions and stereotypes that Black students experience:⁴⁴

- 1) Exoticization: "Black women are asked about hair, food, and dance. Black men are perceived to be athletes."⁴⁵
- 2) Hypersexuality: "Black men seen as sexual predators. Black women were seen as promiscuous."⁴⁶
- 3) Aggressiveness: "Black women are viewed as intimidating or confrontational. Black men were viewed as physically intimidating and violent."⁴⁷

Not only do microaggressions and stereotypes contribute to lack of belonging for Black students, they also contribute to Black students feeling disrespected and underestimated both intellectually and personally.^{48,49,50} For instance, Black students report experiences in which professors or staff make comments that reveal that



they are surprised when Black students solve a problem or excel academically; they express assumptions that Black students speak slang or do not understand the material; they refer to Black male students as “boys”; and they surveil Black students.⁵¹ The continued use of these stereotypes and microaggressions fosters racism on campus and perpetuates an atmosphere of White supremacy.^{52,53} Multiple studies have found that Black students report their professors underestimated them intellectually and treated them differently than their white peers.⁵⁴ As one student said, “If you are White, they treat you with more respect, they expect you to succeed. But if you’re Black, they don’t expect much at all from you.”⁵⁵ In a study about Black student engagement, Black students explained that their professors had low standards for them and they “described their professors as unsupportive teachers who show no interest in getting to know them or understanding them on a personal level.”⁵⁶ They shared that the lack of support, mistreatment, and misunderstanding from professors was one of their greatest challenges on campus and made them uncomfortable approaching their professors.⁵⁷

Based on the research literature, these are a few options that CSU campuses can consider to address these issues facing Black students:

- Demonstrate caring about Black student’s perspectives by making an active effort to learn about them and their lived experience.⁵⁸
- Provide and make mandatory cultural competence and racial bias training for faculty, staff, and campus officers.^{59,60}
- Revise surveillance practices by reviewing the referrals from faculty, staff, and other students for biases/racism.⁶¹

Implications

Black students who feel strong connections with the curriculum and with university faculty and staff are more likely to be engaged, to feel like they belong on campus, and to succeed in college. Not feeling connected or respected on campus, however, can cause students to feel as though college is not for them, which makes persisting in college and completing a degree more challenging. It is important to note that while the literature referenced in this memo discussed the importance of having a more diverse faculty and staff, the demographic composition of administrators should also be considered, as they are key decision makers in the CSU. By being aware of the specific ways that racism and anti-Blackness are manifested on campus for Black students—for example, through curriculum, pedagogy, hiring and retention practices and policies, and microaggressions and stereotypes—CSU faculty, staff, and administrators can address these issues. This means that every campus in the CSU will need to provide curriculum and teaching styles that are culturally relevant for Black students, hire and retain more Black faculty and staff, create safe and welcoming environments for Black students, and otherwise foster equitable



practices and policies in every department and division. These actions can contribute to improving persistence and completion rates for Black students, but educational success is only one area that matters here. Student success programs exist in the CSUs that provide tailored support for Black students through a combination of academic support, career support, cultural awareness, and community building such as the Sankofa Scholars Program at CSU East Bay (see Resources for additional examples). Providing equitable treatment to Black students in higher education is the right thing to do, morally, to confirm and proclaim that we are all people who deserve educational opportunity and access as humans.

Reflection Questions

For those interested in developing strategies to better support Black students in the CSU, we offer the following questions for reflection:

Campus Leadership (Executive/MPPs - Campus and departmental policies, procedures, resource allocation and initiatives):

- Does my campus have a statement on or commitment to racial equity? Is there an action plan that has followed since this statement or commitment?
 - Is there a committee or workgroup that is tasked with implementing any actions? Who is the point of contact for pushing that action plan forward? How can I be involved and partake in the decision-making process?
- What is the racial composition among administrators, faculty, and staff? Are these reflective of the student body? How does our campus recruit administrators, faculty, and staff? Is this done in an equitable way? How can we assess our hiring and retention practices to identify barriers for hiring personnel of color?

Faculty (Curriculum, Pedagogy, Classroom management):

- Does my curriculum include Black scholars? Does my curriculum include diverse representations of Black people? Are there strategies or tools I can access to support me in further diversifying my course curriculum? Are there opportunities at my college to collaborate with and learn from colleagues within or across departments about developing and implementing culturally relevant curriculum? Do opportunities exist to connect with colleagues from other CSU campuses around creating and implementing culturally relevant curriculum? How or from whom can I find out about these opportunities?
- What do I know about Black students on my campus? In my courses? What equity gaps exist by race at the course, department, and campus levels? What survey data are available about the perspectives of Black students regarding the barriers they face on my campus? Do I look at campus, department, and my own course data disaggregated by race? How can I use these data to assess the impacts of changes in my course policies or practices? What survey data are available about the perspectives of Black students regarding barriers they face on my campus? Do I survey my own students about their experiences in my courses, in general, or their experiences with new policies/practices? If there are gaps in data, who can



I work with to advocate for additional data gathering and analysis? How can I support my colleagues in using these data to make changes to policies or practices at the departmental or institutional levels?

Classified Professionals, Faculty, and Administrators:

- Is there training for cultural competency, microaggressions, and racial bias available on my campus? How can I participate in this training? How can we incentivize completion of these trainings across personnel at my campus? If these opportunities do not exist on my campus, how can I access relevant trainings provided by other CSU campuses or external organizations?

Resource List

These resources highlight strategies referenced in this memo:

- [Black Minds Matter \(2015\)](#), a report by Ed-Trust West.
- [Best Practices for Recruiting a Diverse Faculty \(2018\)](#), a report from CSU San Bernardino.
- [Addressing Anti-Blackness On Campus: Implications for Educators and Institutions \(2020\)](#), a webinar hosted by CORA Learning.
- [Equity Toolkit: Inclusive Teaching and Learning](#), a toolkit for instructors to imbed culturally responsive teaching practices into their repertoire of teaching methods.
- [8 Great Job Boards for Diverse Professionals](#), a website that shares top recruitment sites for diverse professionals.
- [Sankofa Scholars Program](#) at CSU East Bay, the only student success program that incorporates Umoja principles into its programming.
- [Male Success Alliance](#) at CSU Dominguez Hills, a program that focuses on providing mentorship, academic and community support to men of color on campus.
- [Black Student Resource Center](#) at CSU San Diego, a center on campus that provides community and academic support while promoting cultural awareness.

Limitations

This memo provides an overview of existing research on this topic. It does not provide a comprehensive review of the literature, nor does it provide extensive information about methodologies of the literature included. We searched for research literature from within the CSU and from California more generally; where these sources were not available, we included other pertinent studies. While most literature referenced in this memo derives from California public higher education, not all studies were of the CSU context nor did they all focus on higher education. One study focused on K-12 schools but most focused on post-secondary education (i.e., community colleges and universities). Most of the studies presented in the memo used qualitative research methods, some used mixed methods, and a few used quantitative methods. Some quantitative studies did not focus specifically on Black students but did present



findings on underrepresented students and disaggregated the findings to show data on Black students. Due to these and other limitations, the CSU Network does not endorse the strategies presented in this memo as “best practices,” and the strategies presented may need to be tailored to specific contexts within CSU campuses.

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Student Success Network 
in the California State University



California State University, Sacramento
Education Insights Center/CSU Student Success Network
6000 J Street, MS 6147
Sacramento, CA 95819
studentsuccessnetwork@edinsights.org
<http://csustudentsuccess.net>