

Advancing Equity Through Guided Pathways Series Discussion Guide #2:

*Leading Culture Change to
Promote Equity:
Perspectives from a CEO of Color*

Michael A. Baston, Rockland Community College,
with Introduction by Kay McClenney,
American Association of Community Colleges

SERIES OVERVIEW

The Advancing Equity through Guided Pathways series aims to foster critical campus conversations about how to close persistent gaps for historically marginalized students. Developed by the National Center for Inquiry & Improvement for the California Guided Pathways Project, the series was generously supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, and the Foundation for California Community Colleges.



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Leading Culture Change to Promote Equity: Perspectives from a CEO of Color

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Introduction

*Under any set of circumstances, leading an institution in work to attain equity in student outcomes is a task fraught with challenges. Yet, those challenges are different for chief executive officers (CEOs) of color and white CEOs. College leaders of color sometimes report hearing that they “care only about ‘their people,’” or that they are angry or embittered, while “their people” may criticize them for doing too little, or even “crossing over to the other side.” For white leaders, the criticisms may be that they do not or cannot recognize the pervasiveness of racial injustice and their own unconscious bias; that they attend too little—or too much—to inequities embodied in systems, policies, and practices; or that they have appropriated the equity agenda from its rightful advocates. How can leaders lead in this context, particularly as Guided Pathways reforms require particular focus on equity-minded change? We explore both perspectives on this issue in this guide and its companion, *Leading Culture Change to Promote Equity: Perspectives from a White CEO* (Guide 3).*

Recognizing the Blessings and Burdens of Leadership

Three years ago, I became the seventh president in Rockland Community College’s 60-year history and the first president of color. To be the first person of color to ascend to any leadership position comes with its blessings and burdens. The blessings include recognition of the unique set of strengths and insights that brings others to put their trust in your leadership. However, the weight of expectations—including those of yourself, your people, those who chose you, and those who believe you should not have been chosen—can be a burden that is sometimes hard to bear.

How to Use this Guide...

The *Advancing Equity through Guided Pathways* series aims to foster critical campus conversations about increasing student equity under a Guided Pathways umbrella. Institutional redesign teams can...

- Read the introductory framing on creating student connection and belonging upon college entry
- Use the discussion questions to facilitate conversations related to planning and action
- Conduct the research tasks to help better understand your students’ experience of this topic

Some guides, including this resource, address issues in the student experience aligned to the stages of the [Completion by Design Loss/Momentum Framework](#), while others address issues of culture and leadership. Across all guides, authors bring their own unique perspectives on and approach to the issue. No guide is intended as the definitive word on its topic.

For related content, discussion questions, and research tasks, review *Fostering Faculty Diversity* (Guide 4) and *Leading Culture Change to Promote Equity: Perspectives from a White CEO* (Guide 3).

For all guides and additional information on the series, visit <http://www.ncii-improve.com/>.

The insights shared below about my journey must be viewed through the prism of context. The most important things to remember as a leader of color, particularly if attention to equity has been benignly neglected on your campus, are these: (1) know who you are, (2) know why you are there, and (3) help others become the best version of themselves.

Using the Lessons of Your Lived Experience

One might hope that by 2020, the phrase “first CEO of color” would be arcane, or that addressing equity as a cultural change imperative would be unnecessary. Sadly, the necessity persists, given structures and systems that, whether intentionally or inadvertently, create an opportunity caste system.

The limited scale of efforts to diversify the leadership pipeline in higher education leave many who have potential with few opportunities to advance. The few CEOs and vice presidents of color on our campuses often carry with them the scars of hazing they endured while trying to convince hiring committee members who rarely looked like them that they could “fit in” to “how things work around here.” I too carry those scars. However, it is important to use the lessons of lived experiences to speak authentically about the need to bring diverse people to the leadership table in a meaningful effort to destroy the opportunity caste system that organizations are typically structured to reinforce.

Dwelling in Duality

Most leaders of color come to understand that dwelling in the duality of culture and organizational leadership is more art than science. When you are hired, it is not because people want you to tell them that they are broken and need to be fixed. They want to know that you are going to help them become the best version of themselves.

Consider the enormous changes occurring in the society, communities, and the workplace and the implications for a college’s value proposition. While these changes are dramatic, the ways many colleges operate have not evolved in decades. For example, today’s student population at Rockland includes 52% students of color, double the number from 30 years ago. In those intervening years, the students, their needs, and the community changed, but the college did not transform with them. As you could imagine, a young man of color with an equity-informed vision as president was a cause for pause by many, particularly for the severely change averse. Not only was I bringing a different cultural perspective but a different generational perspective as well.

Doing What Must Be Done

As a CEO of color tasked with leading cultural change focused on equity, you must be smart, strategic, and steadfast.

You would not be serving in the role if you were not intellectually capable. However, being smart in this work requires sharpened emotional intelligence to complement intellect. You must know yourself and others’ perceptions of you. You must genuinely know those around you. You must establish yourself as worthy to be followed because you listen, not just speak.

Further, you must be strategic. You must understand how to use existing institutional structures, symbols, and stories to advance the cause of leading equitable culture change. I used institutional data

on recruitment, retention, graduation, and demographics; program success metrics; financial and budget analysis; and the voices of the students themselves as an important starting point for our work at Rockland. Once the college community understands the equity gaps that exist in human as well as statistical terms, it can wrestle with its identity and answer fundamental questions. Is this evidence reflective of who we really are as people? Are we satisfied with our current outcomes? Are we willing to resign ourselves to the conclusion that our record on equity is the best we can do? What is the cost of inaction for the institution's economic destiny?

Lastly, you must be steadfast. There are times as you lead this work when you will feel like a salesperson trying to convince people of its importance. Other times you will feel like a soldier battling myths, mistrust, and rumors with bullets of truth and enlightened thinking. At all times you must remain resolutely committed to your ultimate ends. You must communicate with integrity and remember what is at stake: the responsibility for destroying the opportunity caste system. While you may not turn everyone into activists or diehards advancing the equity agenda, if you can increase participation in the work on campus, you can increase the likelihood of the inevitability of positive culture change.

How to Get Started...

Campus leaders of color can use the following Discussion Questions to reflect on their own efforts to lead culture change to promote equity, particularly in the context of Guided Pathways implementation.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe your leadership style? How do you think it can be leveraged to foster conversations on equity inside and outside of the classroom?
2. Discuss your perception of the expectations that various stakeholders have for your leadership related to the equity agenda. Are those expectations reasonable?
3. Are there areas of emotional intelligence in which you can improve? What ways can you implement those improvements in your day-to-day work?
4. What existing institutional structures, symbols, and/or stories can be used to advance the case for equity at your campus?