

# Advancing Equity Through Guided Pathways Series Discussion Guide #10:

*Creating Active and Culturally-Responsive  
Learning Environments for Students*

SERIES  
OVERVIEW



California  
Guided Pathways



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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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# Creating Active and Culturally-Responsive Learning Environments for Students

Advancing Equity through Guided Pathways | Discussion Guide 10

By Tia Brown McNair, Association of American Colleges & Universities and Rob Johnstone, National Center for Inquiry & Improvement

## Introduction

Guided Pathways Pillar 4, Ensure Learning, calls for the use of culturally-responsive teaching practices that empower students to relate coursework to their lived experiences and backgrounds, and active learning approaches where students meaningfully engage with course material and each other. The framework suggests these practices and experiences be evidence-based to increase the likelihood for student learning, engagement, and preparation for lifelong success.<sup>i</sup> The framework also recommends these features be embedded in an institution-wide commitment to equity-minded, asset-based teaching improvements that support student achievement.<sup>ii</sup>

Yet, the creation of active and culturally-responsive learning environments calls for fundamental rethinking about the role of educators, including how they can serve as change agents in the process of developing and sustaining educational experiences that are expansive and that respond to students' needs.

## Reflection: A Necessary Starting Point

As campus educators unpack how to address these elements for Ensuring Learning, self-reflection is an essential first step. In *The Underestimated Significance of the Practitioner Knowledge in the Scholarship of Student Success*, Bensimon states:

Over time and through a variety of experiences, [practitioners] have developed implicit theories about students: why they succeed, why they fail, and, what, if anything, they can do to reverse failure. . . practitioners for the most part are likely not aware of what knowledge or experiences constitute their sense-making and how the judgments they

## 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 *Reframing Classroom Instruction to Engage a Diverse Community of Students* (Guide 9).

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

make about a phenomenon such as student success or failure are shaped by that sense-making.<sup>iii</sup>

In our efforts to advance student success, we have not taken the necessary time to critically consider how our lived experiences, values, assumptions, and biases have an impact on the decisions we make and how we design, implement, and analyze policies and practices. We often state that we must know who are students are, but the first questions should be: Who am I as an educator? How do my lived experiences, my worldviews, my preconceived notions, my biases, and my values manifest in my teaching strategies and decision-making? How will understanding who I am help me to develop as an educator who fully promotes active and culturally-responsive learning environments?

From there, educators can progress to additional questions such as: What is my understanding of what makes an educational environment culturally-responsive and race-conscious? How are my current practices promoting active learning in an educational environment that is culturally-responsive? Where are the opportunities for growth? What does it mean for *me* to be an active learner who seeks to build and sustain a culturally-responsive learning environment that is aware of social and historical contexts that perpetuate exclusion?

## Critical Race Theory: An Essential Lens for Creating Active and Culturally-Responsive Learning Environments

This reflection positions educators to then consider which practices to embrace in an effort to promote an active and culturally-responsive learning experience for students. The Guided Pathways framework promotes active learning through the use of applied learning and project-based experiences, often referred to as high-impact practices.<sup>iv</sup> These practices include first year seminars and experience, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, ePortfolios, service learning, community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects.

Educators have used these practices for many years to promote higher levels of student engagement and real-world application of knowledge tied to the learning outcomes that employers seek from recent graduates.<sup>v</sup> In addition, research shows that when students from traditionally underserved populations participate in these practices, they have higher self-reported learning gains, grade point averages (GPAs), and retention rates.<sup>vi vii</sup> However, not only is there inequitable participation in high-impact practices across student populations, but the benefits vary based on the design quality of the practice. In other words, not every practice is “high-impact.”

To surface equity gaps, campuses should collect disaggregated data on access to and participation in high-impact practices along with similar data on student achievement of the defined learning outcomes and other student success metrics. The design of high-impact practices, the instructor's sense-making in that process, and the experiences of diverse students will determine whether high-impact practices are culturally-responsive, race-conscious, and engaging for learners. So, what are possible starting points for this level of analysis of educational experiences?

In *Using Critical Race Theory to (Re)Interpret Widely Studied Topics Related to Students in US Higher Education*, Patton, Harper, and Harris (2015) illustrate how Critical Race Theory (CRT) can be used to advance a more comprehensive understanding of the structures that determine inequity and the experiential realities of students of color.<sup>viii</sup> They also explore how deconstructing the topic of student engagement (often from the dominant perspective of whiteness as the norm) through CRT can provide a

deeper analysis of what practices promote active learning and engagement for minoritized students. The experiences of white students cannot be the baseline for determining what active learning, engagement, and a culturally-responsive learning environment represent for minoritized students. The educational designs must include the inputs of the students with diverse lived experiences along with the self-reflection of the educators discussed above.

A campus example of how this knowledge can be demonstrated is the Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) program that originated at Bryn Mawr College and has been expanded to other colleges. Cook-Sather (2019) states that since 2006, the SaLT program has supported students and faculty as they form pedagogical partnerships to address the question, "How do you create and sustain a classroom that is conducive to the learning of a diverse group of students?"<sup>ix</sup> Through classroom observation, dialogue, and reflection, undergraduate students bring life experiences informed by their identities, insights from their varied classroom experiences, and capacity to pose questions to help faculty identify their assumptions about learning and students. Students can affirm faculty members' already inclusive practices and catalyze shifts toward greater inclusivity.

Designing and implementing equity-minded practices that advance the Guided Pathways framework's focus on active and culturally-responsive learning environments requires that we all understand the deep connections between educators as learners and learners as educators. In doing so, we can deliver on the promise of the structural changes associated with Guided Pathways reform by ensuring that the classrooms where diverse students spend the majority of their time on campus are engaging, culturally-responsive, and tailored to their experiences and needs.

## How to Get Started...

Campuses can use the following Discussion Questions and Research Tasks to advance planning and action to create active and culturally-responsive learning environments through Guided Pathways implementation.

### Discussion Questions

1. What is my understanding of what makes an educational environment culturally-responsive and race-conscious?
2. How do my current practices promote active learning and a culturally-responsive educational environment that catalyzes awareness of the social and political contexts that perpetuate exclusion? Where are the opportunities for growth?
3. What does it mean for me to be an active learner who seeks to build and sustain a culturally-responsive learning environment?
4. How do my lived experiences, my worldviews, my preconceived notions, my biases, and my values manifest in my teaching strategies and decision-making?
5. How will understanding who I am help me to develop as an educator who fully promotes active learning and culturally-responsive teaching environments?
6. What structured learning opportunities are available for educators to explore their identities and how they make sense of the world?
7. How do you create and sustain a classroom that is conducive to the learning of a diverse group of students?

## Research Tasks

1. Assess what mechanisms exist for learning about student experiences at your college, particularly in the classroom. What do you know, and what more do you want to learn? Whose experiences are privileged?
2. Determine who has access to and participates in high-impact practices. What are the disaggregated outcomes as a result of participation in these educational experiences?
3. Identify how the design of high-impact practices is currently informed by student experiences and educator sense-making. What are characteristics of a race-conscious and culturally responsive high-impact practice?

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/DESS20/PathwaysGraphic-9-17-19.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> The term “equity-mindedness” refers to the perspective or mode of thinking exhibited by practitioners who call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes. These practitioners are willing to take personal and institutional responsibility for the success of their students, and critically reassess their own practices. It also requires that practitioners are race-conscious and aware of the social and historical context of exclusionary practices in American Higher Education. For more information, visit <https://cue.usc.edu/about/equity/equity-mindedness/>

<sup>iii</sup> Bensimon, E. M. (2007). The underestimated significance of practitioner knowledge in the scholarship on student success. *The Review of Higher Education*, 30(4), 441-469.

<sup>iv</sup> These teaching and learning practices have been widely tested and have been shown to be beneficial for college students from many backgrounds. HIP take many different forms, depending on learner characteristics and on institutional priorities and contexts. For more information, visit <https://www.aacu.org/leap/hips>.

<sup>v</sup> Association of American Colleges & Universities. (2018). *Fulfilling the American dream: Liberal education and the future of work surveys of business executives and hiring managers*. <https://www.aacu.org/research/2018-future-of-work>

<sup>vi</sup> Finley, A., & McNair, T. (2013). *Assessing underserved students' engagement in high-impact practices*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges & Universities.

<sup>vii</sup> Kuh, G., & O'Donnell, K. (2013). *Ensuring quality and taking high-impact practices to scale*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges & Universities.

<sup>viii</sup> Patton, L. D., Harper, S. R., & Harris, J. C. (2015). Using critical race theory to (re)interpret widely-studied topics in U.S. higher education. In A. M. Martinez Aleman, B. Pusser, & E. M. Bensimon (Eds.), *Critical approaches to the study of higher education* (193-219). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

<sup>ix</sup> Cook-Sather, A. (Winter 2019). Increasing inclusivity through pedagogical partnerships between students and faculty. *Diversity & Democracy*, 22(1). <https://www.aacu.org/diversitydemocracy/2019/winter/cook-sather>