



Equity in context: Institutional agency in targeting student supports in Massachusetts community colleges

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Equity in context: Institutional agency in targeting student supports in Massachusetts community colleges

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Abstract

How do related, but independent community colleges operationalize and implement an equity-oriented initiative? In 2021, Massachusetts established the SUCCESS initiative to provide non-financial student supports in all 15 of the state's public community colleges. This paper draws on 35 interviews with program staff across the colleges to ask how they used their institutional data and designed new data collections to (1) select a focal population for their SUCCESS program and (2) apply their criteria to identify a specific cohort. While we find variation in what the colleges viewed as their most urgent equity gaps, we find that in all colleges, data availability informed how practitioners could identify their focal students. Our findings illustrate how diverse community colleges within one state respond differently to the same equity-oriented initiative; they operationalize equity in different ways that are related to their institutional priorities and data availability.

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Introduction

Nationwide and in Massachusetts, community college students face economic and structural barriers to educational persistence and degree completion. Many students balance coursework alongside work obligations and caregiving duties. Their existing challenges to meet basic needs such as food, housing, and transportation were further intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic (Imboden, 2023; Modestino & Forman, 2021). Additionally, community colleges are complex institutions with structural challenges that make it difficult for students to successfully navigate coursework and degree programs (Bailey et al., 2015; McCambly et al., 2023). Persistently low completion rates reflect these obstacles: Only 37 percent of Massachusetts students who begin at a public two-year college earn a two- or four-year degree or certificate within six years, the fifth lowest-ranked in the nation (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2025).

The disparities are more pronounced for marginalized students. Compared to academically similar peers in the same institutions, Black, Hispanic, and low-income students are significantly less likely to earn their credentials (Murnane et al., 2022). In Massachusetts community colleges, only 25 to 27 percent of Black and Hispanic students and 29 percent of students who received a Pell grant completed a credential within six years compared to 40 percent of White students and 41 percent of students who did not receive a Pell grant (MA DHE, 2024). In Massachusetts, Black, Hispanic, and low-income students make up a much larger and

increasing share of community college students compared to the student bodies at four-year institutions (IPEDS, 2023).

Disparities in Massachusetts mirror longstanding national disparities within community colleges and across sectors of higher education (Bensimon, 2007; Brint & Karabel, 1989; Dowd et al., 2006; McCambly et al., 2023). Within the broader ecosystem of higher education in the US, community colleges are the most underfunded sector of higher education and also the most accessible pathway for minoritized students to earn a postsecondary credential (McCambly et al., 2023). Thus, efforts to invest in community colleges relative to four-year institutions or improve community college students' outcomes overall are often ways to pursue equity goals.

Community colleges increasingly seek to address racial disparities in outcomes and experiences internally, such as through changes to institutional policies and individual practices (Bensimon, 2005; Bragg, 2023; Knight, 2023). Whether they are internal to community colleges or initiated at the state level, policy changes are a tool to improve educational equity (Felix, 2021; Gonzales et al., 2021; Mattheis, 2016; Perna et al., 2021).

Data is a key component of equity-mindedness and equity-oriented policy changes; institutions must measure disparities to discuss and address them (Bensimon, 2007; Bensimon, 2012; Kezar, 2019; Perna et al., 2021). For example, when California passed their Student Equity Policy in 2014, they included a measurement phase for community colleges to collect data on and measure disparities that would be targeted with new interventions in the next phase (Ching et al., 2020; Felix & Gonzalez, 2022). Research on this initiative found that colleges' focus on racial equity and racial disparities diminished over time (Ching et al., 2020). Further, while 27 of the 42 community colleges identified disparities facing men of color, very few (6%) of the 923 planned interventions across the community colleges explicitly addressed these disparities (Felix

and Gonzalez, 2022). The California case, and others such as the evaluation of transfer policies across states (Chase et al., 2014) raise questions about how diverse institutions respond to and operationalize equity-oriented policy changes even when they are accompanied with additional resources. Community colleges may take different approaches to data collection and measurement in response to the same equity-oriented call.

In 2021, Massachusetts launched the *Supporting Urgent Community College Equity through Student Services* (SUCCESS) initiative, a first-of-its-kind, statewide investment in support services across all 15 independently governed community colleges (Nurshatayeva et al., 2025). SUCCESS funds a range of non-financial supports for students historically underserved in higher education, including those who are low-income, first-generation, and from minoritized backgrounds. From the outset, the colleges had autonomy in defining their priority populations and tailoring program offerings to their contexts. Under these circumstances, policy implementation literature suggests that organizational and community contexts inform implementation (Durlak & Dupre, 2008; McLaughlin, 1987; Perna et al., 2021).

The SUCCESS initiative brings new, significant, and sustained state investment to student support in community colleges. It also offers an opportunity to consider how a set of independent, but related, community colleges interpret and operationalize the same equity-oriented call. This paper draws on data from early implementation interviews with program staff across the community colleges to ask how Massachusetts community colleges drew on their institutional data and designed new data collections to (1) select a focal population for their SUCCESS program and (2) apply their criteria to identify a specific cohort. We find variation in how community colleges first defined their populations most in need of additional supports and drew on data to identify focal students. Our findings contribute to literature on policy

implementation and equity-mindedness, illustrating how organizational priorities and granular decisions about data shape the early implementation of an equity initiative.

Conceptual Framework

We draw on insights from Bensimon's (2007) equity-mindedness framework that locates unequal student outcomes in institutional practices and attends to the role of community college practitioners who, in the case of Massachusetts, adapt a broad call to their local context. In this framework, data plays an essential role (Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2019). Inequalities must be measured in order to be observed and addressed. Shifting away from a deficit framing for persistent racial and ethnic disparities in outcomes to an equity frame involves attending to the ways in which institutional and practitioner practices produce unequal outcomes. Liera and Desir (2023) build on Bensimon's (2007) framework to conceptualize equity-minded organizations which, among other attributes, (1) enhance the agency of racially conscious staff and minoritized groups, (2) redistribute resources in order to disrupt inequalities and (3) are attuned to the structural disadvantages that minoritized groups experience. This paper considers the SUCCESS initiative as a challenge to community colleges to become more equity-minded at the organizational level.

This paper also connects literature on policy implementation with literature on equity-mindedness, underscoring the agency of organizations and their component practitioners to interpret and apply an equity-oriented policy. We build on Cartwright and Hardie's (2012) argument that evidence-based policy must grapple with local variation and practical constraints. They contend that implementing an evidence-based policy requires more than fidelity to a fixed model; it involves thoughtful adaptation and attention to how different components interact

within complex social systems. This paper considers implementation happening in complex social systems by drawing on a unique case that assumes sites will tailor the equity-oriented intervention to their local challenges and student bodies.

Additionally, the SUCCESS initiative offers financial resources for community colleges to develop their capacity to promote equity. Financial resources are a key component of organizational infrastructure changes to promote equity (Kezar, 2019). Still, efforts to transform organizations are difficult to sustain without changes to infrastructure, including to policies, human resources, incentives and rewards, and accountability systems. Data about students are also an essential part of organizational infrastructure (Kezar, 2019) and shape the kinds of transformations that institutions can make.

We consider the ways in which data collection—both preexisting and new—inform how community colleges approach equity and their theory of change for addressing disparities. A theory of change is an understanding of how and why a program will lead to desired impacts. We employ our conceptual framework to make sense of the range of institutional transformations colleges undertake to implement an equity-oriented policy when they have the resources and autonomy to do so.

Background: SUCCESS in Massachusetts

The SUCCESS initiative, launched by the Massachusetts legislature in 2021¹, establishes funding for the state's 15 public community colleges to offer comprehensive, nonfinancial support, such as proactive advising, coaching, and peer mentoring, aimed at improving retention, persistence, and completion outcomes for groups of students who face systemic barriers in higher

¹ When discussed in reference to the Massachusetts legislature, the years refer to fiscal years. In other words, 2021 refers to FY2021 which ran from July 1, 2020 to June 30, 2021.

education. At the sector level, SUCCESS is part of the broader Massachusetts’ renewed commitment to public community colleges after decades of underfunding public higher education and competing interests from private universities (Groeger, 2022). Since the inaugural year, annual funding for SUCCESS has doubled from \$7 million in 2021 to \$14 million in 2026. SUCCESS serves roughly 15% of all community college students enrolled in the state—the number of students served grew from 6,359 in the 2021–2022 academic year to 10,574 in 2024–2025 (MACC, 2026a; IPEDS, 2023). The SUCCESS initiative defines student eligibility, outlines a process for developing the funding formula, and outlines a menu of supports and services, granting autonomy to colleges in implementation. The specifics of the funding formula have evolved since the creation of SUCCESS; in general, it accounts for the wide variation in the colleges’ size and depends on total enrollment and enrollment of the focal groups who could be eligible for SUCCESS. Still, funding is insufficient to serve every student who could be considered eligible by the legislative categories, so colleges design their own recruitment strategies and means of identifying a cohort of students who will receive, or be invited to receive, SUCCESS services. Although each college’s program may serve their own needs, all programs are open to any student wishing to participate (MACC, 2026b).

This flexibility for colleges to design their SUCCESS programs is important in Massachusetts, where the 15 public community colleges are independently governed (i.e., do not form a state system) and quite diverse (Nurshatayeva et al., 2025). Massachusetts community colleges enroll between 1,500 to more than 8,000 students (of which an average of 80 percent are degree-seeking), are located in rural, suburban, and urban areas across the state, and serve distinct student bodies (IPEDS, 2023).² On average, 38 percent of the students in Massachusetts

² Student population is measured in fall headcount and includes students enrolled for credit and non-credit.

community colleges are Black and Hispanic, though this ranges from 18 percent to 59 percent across the community colleges (IPEDS, 2023). On average, about half (48%) of first-time, full-time students in Massachusetts are awarded Pell grants; this ranges from 34 percent to 57 percent across community colleges (IPEDS, 2023).

The original legislative language prioritized economically disadvantaged, first-generation, minoritized, disabled, and LGBTQ+ students for participation in SUCCESS. Of these categories, race and ethnicity and, often, Pell status are centrally available in colleges' data systems. Disability status is available, but often not linked with other student data for privacy reasons. However, the other eligibility categories—first-generation status and LGBTQ students—were not uniformly or consistently collected when SUCCESS was initially funded by the legislature. Community colleges are directed to serve students in these priority categories who are matriculated, seeking a degree or certificate, and who have not yet earned an associate's degree. Within this framework and the guidance provided by the legislative language, colleges have had considerable autonomy to determine their priority populations and adapt programming to their local needs. For example, colleges vary in the range of services they offer as well as in how they identify and invite students to participate.

Data and Methods

Data Collection

We draw on a set of 35 semi-structured interviews with program directors and staff representing each of the 15 community colleges. We interviewed two to four staff members at each community college between November 2023 and August 2024. We interviewed SUCCESS program directors at each college as well as additional staff whose roles included advisors, coaches, and vice president for academic and student affairs. We recruited participants by

emailing SUCCESS staff a recruitment message that included a link to provide written consent electronically and a brief survey asking about their role and experience. Among the participants, 13 were men, and 22 were women. They had experience working in community colleges ranging from 11 months to 31 years.

Importantly, these interviews took place early in the implementation of the SUCCESS initiative; colleges' SUCCESS programs have continued to evolve beyond what we captured in the interviews. We conducted all interviews over Zoom, excepting two in person interviews that took place after a statewide convening. Hour-long semi-structured interviews with program staff focused on the objectives, services, and focus population of their SUCCESS program, the implementation process, as well as their perceptions of impacts and challenges. Most relevant to this study, we asked questions such as "How do you recruit students to participate in the SUCCESS program?" and "Could you describe the population of students your SUCCESS efforts are designed to support?" with a probe for "what was the rationale for focusing on this/these group(s)?" With participants' permission, we recorded and transcribed the interviews. During the transcription process, we replaced all participants' and program names with study ID numbers. In this paper, we refer to each college by a pseudonym.

Data Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, we used the flexible coding approach (Deterding & Waters, 2021) to catalog the transcripts using index codes that corresponded to the sections of the interview guide (e.g., "program goals and offerings," "recruitment and target population," "challenges"). During this first index-coding stage, we wrote internal memos about emergent themes and patterns (Miles et al., 2014). In order to address our research questions for this paper, we then developed and applied a set of analytic codes, such as "eligibility pool," "scale-up

identity-based,” “stigmatized program identity,” and “filtering,” to a subset of the data pertaining to the research questions about focal population and cohort selection. After reading the quoted text within and across the analytic codes, we identified patterns through memos and team discussions that became the primary findings of this paper.

Findings

While each community college designed their SUCCESS program in response to the same guidelines within the same state, our findings indicate wide variation in what the colleges view as their most urgent equity gaps. Across all colleges, data availability shaped the parameters that practitioners could use to identify their focal students.

Colleges are aware of a range of disparities in student outcomes, some of which are named in the SUCCESS legislation. However, of the five priority populations specified in the SUCCESS legislation, race and ethnicity are most readily accessible in colleges’ data systems. Indeed, all of the community colleges used race and ethnicity in some way to identify their focal population (Table 1). Colleges have not typically linked disability data with other student data or collected information about LGBTQ identity or first-generation status in a standardized or comprehensive way³. Thus, the SUCCESS-relevant equity gaps that colleges are aware of are by race, ethnicity, and sometimes by Pell eligibility. This section details the ways that data availability and understanding of equity shaped how the community colleges selected a focal population for their SUCCESS program and applied the criteria to identify a cohort.

Identity-Based Programs

³ Although data collection on LGBTQ+ identity and first-generation status were not standardized at the time, some colleges already collected this information. Data collection on LGBTQ identity and first-generation status is becoming more standardized at the time of writing.

Several colleges used SUCCESS funds to build or invest in an identity-based program that fits SUCCESS criteria (Table 1). In these programs, the focal population is narrow enough that it is also the cohort which will be offered SUCCESS services. Program staff from these colleges described their programs as emphasizing community building and facilitating connection among students of color. One staff member from Franklin College⁴ described his role in the program:

I am a professional mentor for men of color. I support any man who identified as Latinx, Hispanic, African American, Asian, Pacific Islander, Indigenous, anything.... And, yeah, we're really just here to create a sense of community, provide them with personal, one-on-one support, and just be here for whenever they need....We're hoping that if they have such a positive experience, if they're being guided throughout, that they'll come back each semester and ultimately...graduate.

The sense of community and intentional relationship building that this staff member describes is intertwined with the program's theory of change; if students feel supported, guided, and connected on campus, they may be more likely to persist and complete their degree.

Using race and ethnicity, as well as gender, to identify a cohort limits the extent of cross-unit data sharing required to identify the focal population. Central College designed their SUCCESS program for Black and Latino men to address persistent gaps in retention and completion compared to other students. Their first task was identifying men of color in the data and contacting them.

When concerns were brought by faculty to upper administration about the treatment and experiences of...men of color at the college, that led to a convening of sorts.... In our

⁴ The names of all colleges are pseudonyms.

conversations, a couple of things came to the fore. One: we need to determine who our men of color were. And two: ...once we figure out who our men of color were, we would better understand whether it was more a matter of supporting our men of color or helping them navigate a system that was never... intended for them to be successful in the first place.

This staff member drew a distinction between providing men of color with extra support and an acknowledgement of the structural limitations of the institution and practitioners that comprise it.

Without a theory of change rooted in equity, an emphasis on the recruitment of racially minoritized students can feel othering and counterproductive. A staff member from Douglass College described how they initially used race and ethnicity to identify their focal population for SUCCESS:

Our initial outreach to students...was this is going to be for students of color and queer students to come and get extra help, right? And so, I put together this presentation and information session, and I invited students to attend, and within minutes of holding those presentations, we got feedback from students that says, 'What? Is this because I'm Brown? Like, what is this even about? I have a 4.0.' And so, what wasn't communicated to me from the analyst and the committee is that they had selected all students for intervention regardless of GPA. And I was like, 'Are you kidding me?'

In this staff person's interpretation, high achieving students of color felt stigmatized by their invitation to participate in a student support program. Their experience of having inadvertently created a program that students experienced as stigmatizing contributed to Douglass' decision to later re-design their cohort selection process. It is worth noting that high-achieving students of color also could benefit from additional supports and services, including from an identity-based

program. However, Douglass College illustrates the issues with using race and ethnicity to recruit students without a strong theory of change rooted in equity.

Other colleges shared the concern of what it would mean to prioritize racially minoritized students in SUCCESS recruitment without programming or a theory of change rooted in racial equity. To avoid stigmatizing students, Ewing College decided to provide broad access to SUCCESS services across their student populations and to use the priority populations referenced in the legislative language to identify a cohort for reporting to the state after the fact. As one staff member from Ewing College put it, “We didn’t want to get into othering in any way, or to make students feel like, ‘Oh, *they* need extra help.’ And... being kind of deficit-based in that approach.” This respondent went on to describe how an earlier iteration of their program had used administrative data to identify and select students and then the administration felt the program was successful and wanted to scale the program up to serve more students:

The administration was like, ‘We want 100% of students to have this. Now I could argue that I don’t think that’s the right approach...That’s equality, but not equity. And not every student needs a SUCCESS coach, and even if that student never interacts with me, I’m still doing work on their behalf, and I’m still paying attention to what they’re doing, and I’m looking...at their transcripts, and making sure they got every single transfer credit....It’s kind of a push-pull between, like, how do we make sure the right students are getting this and all the students that need it are getting it, while also understanding that we have limited resources and that we can’t forever increase caseloads and still expect the same results from it.

While Ewing’s broad access program avoids the potential that students could feel singled out by an invitation to receive supplemental support services for students of color, it is important to

clarify that an identity-based program is not inherently stigmatizing. Still, Ewing College's interpretation of students' perceptions raises a tension between equity and equality. Similar to the colleges that have identity-based SUCCESS programs, Ewing's broad-access approach limits the extent of data work required before starting to serve students. Instead, Ewing College only draws on the legislatively defined categories for reporting purposes. Overall, the colleges that have identity-based SUCCESS programs foreground racial equity in their conception of how the program will work. Additionally, they primarily draw on race and ethnicity to identify SUCCESS students, which is relatively straightforward in comparison to programs that use a filtering approach.

Filtering Programs

The majority of community colleges start with a broad pool of students and use one or more key characteristics to filter, selecting the students who will comprise the SUCCESS cohort. Colleges adopt a filtering approach to align SUCCESS with their institutional priorities as well as to prioritize which students will receive supplemental services for which there is limited funding. In comparison to the identity-based programs that emphasize community and relationship-building in their theory of change, colleges that use filtering to identify their cohorts often focus on a specific, stubborn disparity and take a more data-driven approach to allocating resources. Whether or not their motivating disparity aligned with the legislative guidelines, the legislative guidelines can reorient colleges' goals to be more equity oriented. The filtering method of identifying a focal population and cohort requires more up-front aggregation and collection of student data.

A filtering approach to the selection of a focal population involves starting with a pool of eligible students, as specified in the legislation, and then using another key characteristic, such as engagement to create a cohort for reporting. For example, Anthony College aimed to serve “minoritized students, low-income students..., students that really hadn’t been welcomed traditionally in higher education.” From this definition of equity, another staff person explained how they use institutional data to identify their cohort:

We use Pell eligibility as a proxy [for low-income], with race and ethnicity....And then also disability status...And there’s kind of a range of other things that make students eligible. But in terms of the data that we actually have, that’s how we largely pull our eligibility population....But we... report them [as participants] to the state... [if] they have participated in something, they have come to a coaching session..., a workshop, or ... one of our events.

This staff member acknowledges that there are additional eligibility categories specified in the legislation (i.e., LGBTQ+ identity and first-generation status) that Anthony College does not collect data on. Thus, they create an eligible pool of students using race and ethnicity, Pell eligibility, and disability status and consider their cohort to be those students who engage with at least one service.

Another filtering approach to cohort selection involves starting with an attribute, such as part-time status or math readiness, that is salient for the college’s goals and then identifying a cohort of students who meet the legislative criteria. For example, a staff member from Massachusetts College focused initially on improving part-time students’ graduation outcomes, which lag in comparison to graduation outcomes for full-time students:

Eighty percent of our students are part-time. So, we know it's a big chunk of our population. We know they're not succeeding at the same rates. And then it's an additional layer to meet the legislative language of the funding. So, it's first-time part-time ...but they also have to meet one of the markers in the legislative language..., in our case, Black or Hispanic, low socioeconomic status, first-generation, and students with disabilities, we aren't able to identify the LGBTQ population. So that's kind of where we focused our energy was our data [and] aligning it with what the legislative language wanted us to do with it.

In this case, the statewide priorities of SUCCESS are shaping how Massachusetts College invests in students, influencing which students the college prioritizes in their broader goal to improve outcomes for part-time students.

Table 1. Focal population and/or cohort selection, by community college

Community college	Selection method	Legislative categories used to identify focal population and/or cohort				
		Race/ ethnicity	Pell	Disability	LGBTQ+	First- generation
Anthony College	Filtering	x	x	x		
Barnet College	In transition at time of interview					
Central College	Identity-based	x				
Douglass College	Filtering	x	x	x	x	x
Ewing College	Filtering*	x	x	x		
Franklin College	Identity based	x				
Gibson College	Filtering	x	x	x		
Hall College	Filtering	x	x	x	x	x
Irwin College	Filtering	x			x	
James College	Filtering	x			x	x
King College	Filtering	x		x	x	
Levine College	Filtering	x	x		x	x
Massachusetts College	Filtering	x	x	x		x
Nicholson College	Identity based	x				
Oliver College	Identity based	x	x			x

Note: All names are pseudonyms. This table reflects program descriptions at the time of the interviews. This table lists the legislative categories used by the college, but some colleges also draw on other indicators such as academic indicators or enrollment status to recruit students.

*: This program provided broad access to their SUCCESS program and used institutional data to create a cohort for reporting later on

Compiling Data to Identify Participants

The ways that community colleges define their focal population for their SUCCESS programs necessitate varying degrees of institutional change to collect new data or link data from disparate organizational units. On one hand, identity-based programs use relatively few demographic categories to conceptualize their focal population and recruit students into a cohort, necessitating minimal data linking and new data collections. On the other hand, the colleges that use filtering processes described the challenges inherent in linking data across siloed parts of the university. After pivoting away from their race and ethnicity focused program, Douglass College adopted a filtering approach to collect and join multiple sources of data to identify a cohort. A Douglass staff member describes the practical challenges with using Pell data to identify low-income students before identifying a cohort:

I worked very hard in the first year and a half to increase the availability of data so that we could better identify students on the front end. And so, we can use Pell eligibility for our low-income students, but there's a lag on Pell eligibility... So, we did have some students who we found like we were serving but then they weren't eligible. It was like, whoops! ...We don't have the data up front so that's still a challenge.

In practice, compiling various sources of data that are rarely used together involves working across disparate parts of the university. A staff member from Massachusetts College described their collaboration with the registrar's office:

We worked on a lot of spreadsheets and a lot of emails back and forth.... We [got] an automated list every day of the students who were accepted the previous day, and the registrar's office has been really great with us. They actually, in that list, were able to populate some of the SUCCESS factors that we looked for. So they were able to include race and ethnicity, whether the student had identified on their application that they had a disability.... It didn't include anything about low-income status, because ...a lot of students haven't filled their FAFSAs at that point. One thing we played around with was using zip code as a proxy to kind of get an idea. We didn't really go forward with that though, it was getting complicated. So we kind of focused on race, ethnicity, disability status and...first-gen status...finally, we got that on the application.

After some trial and error, the registrar's office was able to provide key student data for Massachusetts College to identify which part-time students to serve. Additionally, Massachusetts College uses Pell eligibility to assess low-income status which needed to be provided by another office on campus. Just as Massachusetts College added a question to their application to assess first-generation status, several other colleges added a question to their application about LGBTQ identity for the purpose of identifying a SUCCESS cohort.

Discussion

Our study contributes to literature at the intersection of equity-mindedness and policy implementation, illustrating how organizational priorities and granular decisions about data shape the early implementation of an equity initiative. Specifically, we draw on the case of the SUCCESS initiative, in which Massachusetts provides funding to their 15 public community colleges to implement evidence-based student support services in an effort to improve student

outcomes, including retention, persistence, and completion. SUCCESS seeks to promote equitable outcomes within Massachusetts community colleges as well as addressing historical imbalances across sectors which serve distinct student bodies (McCambly et al., 2023; Groeger, 2022). We ask how Massachusetts community colleges used their institutional data and designed new data collections and data-sharing processes to both select a focal population for their SUCCESS program and apply their criteria to identify a specific cohort. We show how institutional variation and the practical constraints of data availability informed the design and implementation of SUCCESS programs (Cartwright and Hardie, 2012).

We find variation in what Massachusetts community colleges see as their most urgent equity gaps and describe the ways in which data availability informed how community colleges could identify their focal populations and specific cohorts. Several colleges designed programs to address specific racial equity gaps. These programs largely rely on race and ethnicity to identify students. However, programs that initially used race and ethnicity to form their cohort without programming, or staffing focused on racial equity changed course. Reflections from these programs illustrate how an underlying equity-minded theory of change supports an institutional focus on racial disparities (Bensimon 2007; Liera and Desir 2023). Without this equity orientation, programs may struggle to connect with students and thus, may have to change course.

Most colleges used a data-driven filtering approach to identify their students, first using some initial criteria to define a focal population pool and then an additional set of criteria to filter a specific cohort who would receive SUCCESS services. This approach is more data intensive than the identity-based approach and requires more up-front work to collect and aggregate the requisite data. Accordingly, colleges that use a filtering approach target an intersection of

disparities. Our findings underscore the importance of data in prioritizing disparities on which to focus. In cases when colleges have measured important, but non-demographic related disparities—such as between part-time and full-time students or between students who are prepared for college-level math and those who are not—an initiative like SUCCESS can encourage colleges to target these disparities with an intersectional lens.

Our findings show how diverse community colleges within one state respond to the same equity-oriented initiative with different equity priorities and operationalizations of equity. Data availability meaningfully informs colleges' varied equity priorities and definitions (Bensimon, 2005; Kezar, 2019). Initial data availability shapes both the kinds of disparities of which community colleges are aware, and subsequent efforts to examine, monitor, and address disparities. Even though students' race and ethnicity were relatively accessible to community colleges at the outset of the initiative, colleges differed in how they drew on race and ethnicity to identify their focal students. Colleges whose SUCCESS programs had a theory of change rooted in racial equity primarily used race and ethnicity to identify their cohorts. Colleges who used a more data-intensive approach to recruitment still advanced racial equity in addition to seeking to reduce other disparities. Data availability and organizational priorities are important sources of variation in policy implementation across complex social systems.

Limitations

The interviews on which this study is based took place early on in the design and implementation of the community colleges' SUCCESS initiatives. Thus, the data do not support claims about students' take-up of the new services and programs' effectiveness. Further, as time has passed since the initiative began, programs have continued to develop, and data and funding practices have evolved. We are planning further study of service take-up and effectiveness.

Future study could also consider an in-depth case study design, conducting sustained observations on campuses and triangulating across multiple data collections. Future studies could consider the experiences of eligible students who may not be members of a college's focal population, but who opt in to SUCCESS programming and services.

Recommendations

The variation in how community colleges operationalize equity as well as the centrality of data availability offer insights not only for researchers but also for policymakers and practitioners seeking to design and implement systemwide student supports to promote equity. Specifically, policymakers and practitioners should consider the tradeoffs of autonomy in program design (Matland, 1995). From the state or system perspective, allowing community colleges the autonomy to define and operationalize equity is inclusive of institutions with distinct priorities and can promote innovation. In practice, institutional autonomy to identify a focal population and design a program also contributes to variation in aims and approaches across institutions (Matland, 1995). Following other research in this area (Perna et al., 2021), future research could examine associations between institutional attributes and SUCCESS program design.

Additionally, states and systems should consider how data availability, and the feasibility and timing of new data collection, could affect the implementation of equity-oriented policies and programs. In the case of SUCCESS, several of the categories of vulnerable students are not uniformly measured within colleges, much less across colleges. Our findings echo a core tenet of equity-mindedness literature that disparities must be measurable to be targeted (Bensimon, 2007), although community colleges can respond to similar disparities in a variety of ways.

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