

# Perspective: Students, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Career Technical Education

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California's Build Back Better effort requires reimagining possibilities. Student success is the key to the economic vitality of the state and of local regions. In a report published by the California Governor's Council for Post-Secondary Education, *Recovery with Equity: A Roadmap for Higher Education After the Pandemic*, a series of recommendations were established focused on the following guiding principles:

- **Fostering Inclusive Institutions:** Institutional cultures and approaches to teaching and learning that work for all learners, especially those left behind.
- **Streamlining Pathways to Degrees:** An integrated statewide system for admission and transfer to provide clear, easy-to-navigate pathways to degrees.
- **Facilitating Student Transitions:** High-touch, high-tech guidance and improved academic preparation for college access and success.
- **Simplifying Supports for Student Stability:** Resources and structures packaged and simplified to help students meet basic, digital, and financial aid needs. (California Governor's Council for Post-Secondary Education, 2021, p.4).

Leaders in the California Community Colleges system must stay focused on achieving positive and equitable outcomes for students.

In May of 2020, several police officers participated in and carried out the murder of George Floyd. This incident activated individuals and organizations to demand the end of racism and a call for all systems to address and dismantle systemic and institutional racism. On June 5, the California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office released a Call to Action to address structural racism in higher education. In June of 2020, Academic Senate for California

Community Colleges President John Stankas (2020) issued a special message that called for faculty in the community college system to create an actionable agenda to “change the parts of our system we have the power to change.” In September 2020, the Student Senate for California Community Colleges published its *Anti-Racism: A Student Plan of Action*. The plan addressed a need for increased cultural awareness and respect, equity training, curriculum changes, peer mentors and alliances, and a racially conscious classroom experience (Student Senate for California Community Colleges, 2020).

Resolutions and other feel-good statements are not doing enough to unravel a system that was created on racist ideals, and the sequence of events in 2020 made this fact painfully clear. The plan of action starts with students and with teachers, staff, and administrators. Career and Technical Education programs are essential in the lives of students of color, who often rely on the skills learned to go directly into the workforce. Unfortunately, at an institution that focuses more on supporting its transfer students, the focus on these students can be lost.

With the pandemic of COVID-19 and the unemployment numbers seen in 2020, California is in dire need of skills training for a new workforce. Employers have indicated that a skills gap exists within their current workforce due to rapid changes in technology. Industry partners face challenges filling positions that require skilled workers. Furthermore, according to a recent survey conducted by the Educational Credit Management Corporation (2021), incoming student populations such as Generation Z teens are more interested in obtaining skills and short-term training that lead to careers, compared to the decline of interest in attending four-year universities. According to the study, 61% of participants believed that skills-based education—such as trade skills or CTE education—made sense, 45% of participants agreed that two-year training made sense, and about 25% of survey participants were more likely to attend a school that offered CTE programs based on their COVID-19 experience. Industry partners are seeking a workforce with proven competencies. Incoming students are interested in attending community colleges to obtain two-year training and skills-based short-term certificates, especially in the post-pandemic landscape. Professionals in higher education have an opportunity to provide open access training to community members through the CTE programs offered on their campuses. Through collaboration with employers, colleges can offer CTE programs that address workforce needs and student interests and are foundational to mitigating the skills gap.

In compliance with consultation requirements in Education Code §§70901 and 70902, the ASCCC formed the Career Technical Education Leadership Committee (CTELC) to provide

recommendations on CTE issues. At least 70 percent of the committee members are faculty within CTE disciplines and recognize both faculty and student needs in CTE programs. The committee works collaboratively with the ASCCC Executive Committee to assist community college districts, CTE departments, and CTE faculty to ensure that career technical education and workforce development provide responsive curriculum aligned to current and emergent industry trends and to focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in all aspects of career education. Due to the commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, the CTELC has expanded the participation of diverse CTE faculty in leadership roles at the local, regional, and statewide levels through its ongoing professional development efforts. Furthermore, the committee has actively sought out recommendations and counsel for increasing diversity from student senate leaders.

CTE programs have a commitment to engage with business and industry to offer students high-quality programming and work-based educational experiences. “Work-based learning provides students an opportunity as aspiring employees to explore careers and to turn theory and simulation into practice by gaining on-the-job experience. The hands-on experience gained from work-based learning opportunities, especially when considered in combination with the attainment and application of employment soft skills, is a critical component of career training and preparation. Students completing CTE programs with work-based learning embedded are well-equipped to enter the workforce” (Academic Senate for California Community Colleges. 2019, p.1). As faculty continue to engage with these partners, colleges and senate leaders can play a role to ensure that CTE programs are supported as they explore educational opportunities for students within their local industries. These partnerships prepare students for employment in their fields.

Colleges can uphold a commitment to diversity in several ways:

- Facilitate the development of an industry steering committee convened to assist in program development and program enhancements.
- Address representation and diversity through the college outreach program focused on creating an environment for all students to thrive.
- Promote and retain vendors who do business with the college that are committed to supporting student preparation, a strong local economy, and fostering social-economic equity and social justice.

Some actions CTE departments can implement to inform industry and business partners of the commitment to diversity and to keep the local academic senate informed are as follows:

- Prepare a student participation and student CTE program completion report disaggregated by race, ethnicity, and gender and present the report to industry and business partners and the local academic senate.
- Prepare a report on the composition of local college industry advisory committees and present the report to industry and business partners and the local academic senate.
- Train CTE faculty to review their curriculum, student services, and support with an equity-minded focus. Include industry and business partners in the training.

## REFERENCES

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