

# Pathways Collaborative Equity Grant

Final Report



Case Studies of  
Equity-Focused  
Community  
College  
Transformation

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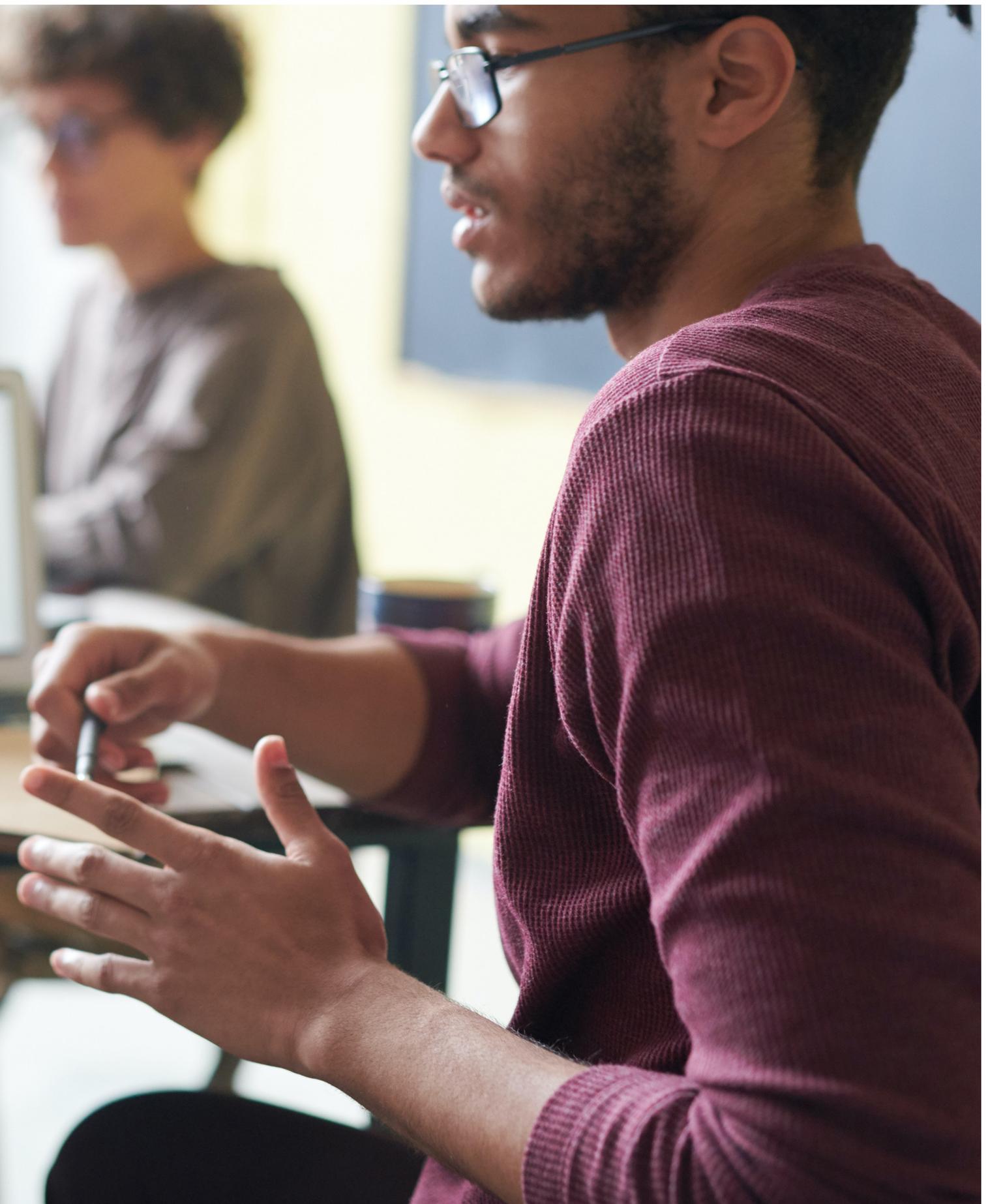
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Achieving the Dream

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# Executive Summary

**A**chieving the Dream (ATD) and the Aspen Institute College Excellence Program (CEP) have a history of partnering to deliver focused training and technical support for change leadership in community colleges. ATD and CEP have collaborated to develop highly effective two-day institutes, site visits, preconference workshops, and pathways institute training sessions that reflect our organization's shared and complementary expertise in change leadership and organizational capacity-building.

Independently, each organization has also developed frameworks for supporting equity-focused leadership development. CEP teaches equity leadership through the Aspen Presidential Fellowship and via trainings through the Pathways Institutes and JFF Student Success Centers, where we focus on helping leaders think systematically about strategies to advance equity in student access and outcomes. ATD, whose mission since its founding 15 years ago has centered on equity as essential in community college reform work, is guided by a formal equity statement also used by ATD colleges to drive the development of its own equity statements.

In each organization's work helping develop colleges' capacity for equity, we identified a common need for additional resources to enhance our ability to teach cross-functional institutional leaders about effective strategies for defining equity challenges and building organizational capacity to be equity-adaptive in policy and practice.

In particular, in the context of transformational pathways-based reform strategies, we have identified the need for case studies and instructional resources that can help leadership teams conceptualize and operationalize strategies that are empirically validated and adaptable to each institution's unique contexts.

With this grant, ATD and CEP have been working to create new tools for our common training and support work and for the broader pathways reform community. Specifically, we are developing three case studies and a suite of accompanying instructional tools (activities, worksheets, data templates, self-assessment tools, etc.). When completed, these resources will (1) enhance the ability of Pathway Collaborative members to provide training and support activities around equity leadership, and (2) be made publicly available through the [Aspen Student Success Leadership](#) curriculum and ATD's website for use and adoption by other Pathways Collaborative partners and institutions.

The instructional resources developed through this project will contribute to the ability of the Pathways Collaborative members (including Aspen and ATD) to support equity-focused leadership through our independent and collaborative training and technical assistance efforts. Additionally, these resources will be made publicly available to the field through the Aspen College Excellence Curriculum website, ATD's website, and the websites of Pathways Collaborative members.



A photograph of a man with short dark hair and a beard, wearing a brown button-down shirt, smiling broadly as he shakes hands with another person whose hand is visible on the right. The background is a bright, modern office space with a white wall and a wooden desk. A laptop is open on the desk in front of him. A dark blue semi-transparent banner is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the text 'Final Report Narrative' in white serif font.

# Final Report Narrative

**\*\*Note:** This report reflects the findings to date of work funded through the Pathways Collaborative Partners Equity Fund from the OCCRL with generous support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Initial findings from the project inform the ongoing efforts of ATD and Aspen's expanding equity focused endeavors.

## Background

The work funded by this grant is focused on helping to advance an understanding of the capacities, strategies, and tools required for equity leadership, particularly in the context of the transformational change efforts that are underway at colleges engaged in pathways reforms. This project is in response to the need for better tools and training for campus leaders around a range of interrelated but distinct issues in the realms of advancing equity, diversity, and inclusion within postsecondary education.

The new tools will serve to improve training for pathways coaches, student success center directors, and other organizations that seek to advance an equity agenda within transformational reforms.

Students of color and those from low-income families and communities in the U.S. have long experienced disparities in educational opportunity, starting in pre-K-12 education. This continues to manifest in the form of persistent and significant disparities in postsecondary access and attainment, ultimately leading to significant disparities in social mobility and economic opportunity (Witham, Malcom-Piqueux, Dowd, & Bensimon, 2015).

These issues continue to be a challenge for the nation's postsecondary education system as a whole. And though college-going rates have increased during the last few decades among low-income students and students of color, those students still enter a stratified system in which they are disproportionately enrolled in institutions that have lower graduation rates and less opportunity for upward economic mobility (Carnevale & Strohl, 2013; Perna & Kurban, 2013).

Lessons from more than a decade of deep transformational work in efforts like Achieving the Dream, Completion by Design and other pathways-based reform initiatives have demonstrated that while such reforms serve to fundamentally change the student experience, unless college leaders develop explicit theories of change for how such reforms will contribute to more equitable allocation of supports and resources for the students who most need them, equity gaps seldom disappear (see, e.g., Jenkins, Brown, Fink, Lahr, & Yanaguira, 2018). And yet, many presidents are both uncomfortable with leading equity conversations and inadequately prepared to spearhead the processes of transformational change while also articulating and enacting an explicit vision for equity in student success.

Helping leaders and leadership teams gain clarity and develop intentional and disciplined strategies for addressing these challenges is critical for improving equity in access and outcomes. CEP and ATD believe that equity leadership in higher education requires institutions to develop a holistic capacity for disciplined processes that clarify, communicate, and enact values of equity, diversity, and inclusion in policy and practice. Doing so requires data-informed strategies and tools for implementing and measuring those concepts as core institutional values. Leaders in the field must be provided with greater clarity and a stronger strategic "toolbox" that will serve them in building an equity-focused student success agenda and in stewarding the institution through difficult conversations both on campus and in their communities. The need to provide better training and more tools for pathways coaches and others who support the work of college teams is just as important.



The objective of this project is to contribute new resources to that toolbox by collaboratively developing case studies and teaching materials that enhance the ability of the Pathways Collaborative members, including our respective organizations—independently and collaboratively—as well as our partners in the field, to support equity leadership in the context of transformational change efforts like Guided Pathways.

With support from the [Equity Conscious Community College Pathways](#) (EC3P) project, ATD and CEP have engaged in the development of a set of case studies and instructional resources aligned to the essential practices of the pathways and the leadership challenges we have each seen in the course of our respective organizations' work to support the implementation of those practices. These case studies and instructional tools are designed to support leaders and leadership teams in assessing equity challenges and establishing explicit goals around absolute and relative improvements in outcomes for students of color and low-income students.

The tools are also used to devise and implement holistic, scaled strategies to ensure that institutional policies and practices better serve students. This is strategically done through:

- **Onboarding and early momentum building**, including equity-focused strategies that provide early and consistent career exploration and planning guidance to build aspirations and connect students with programs of study that match their interests and goals with educational and employment opportunities. In addition, offer students clear

and holistic educational plans and support them to succeed in key gateway courses that build foundational skills and productive persistence.

- **Equitable integration and delivery of academic and non-academic supports** targeted to the needs of marginalized students so they can fully engage in and benefit from postsecondary learning;
- **Equity-minded and inclusive pedagogy**, including strategies for engaging faculty in examining and using disaggregated data to improve the learning experiences of students of color, low-income students, and those with other marginalized identities. Other measure include providing professional development to support innovative course design and delivery, infusion of high-impact practices and culturally responsive instruction, and ensuring all students have equitable access to inclusive educational practices that develop the talent, skills, and experience that enable them to lead productive and healthy lives.
- **Building capacity to be “equity-adaptive” in policy and practice**, including assessing and defining equity challenges, establishing holistic and continuous improvement processes to assess student needs, allocating resources equitably aligned to those needs, routinely evaluating and improving equity interventions, and scaling and sustaining effective practices.



Each of the three institutional case studies explore how colleges have defined their unique equity challenges relative to their geographic, economic, and demographic contexts as well as their established equity goals, and how they designed and implemented holistic interventions and capacities such as those described above. Following the development of the case studies, which are still underway, CEP and ATD will translate the case study learning into a suite of actionable applied learning tools, potentially including activities, worksheets, data templates, and self-assessment rubrics that are tailored to various leadership audiences.

#### *Anticipated Outcomes and Sustained Field Impact*

The instructional resources developed through this project will contribute to the ability of the Pathways Collaborative members (including Aspen and ATD) to support equity-focused leadership through our independent and collaborative training and technical assistance efforts. Additionally, these resources will be made publicly available to the field through the Aspen College Excellence Curriculum website, ATD's website, and the websites of Pathways Collaborative members.

Specifically, these resources will enhance existing tools and support strategies for Pathways Collaborative members, contributing to existing portfolios of change leadership and capacity-building resources that each organization currently delivers. By developing these additional equity-centered resources, ATD and CEP anticipate that each organization will be better equipped to support institutional leadership teams with whom we work in our respective programming to:

- Articulate and operationalize an explicit equity-centered theory of change to guide their comprehensive student success reforms. Specifically, the leadership teams will be able to more concretely and explicitly articulate how their guided pathways and related reforms lower barriers and target resources for students in ways that advance equity.
- Build their capacity to identify specific equity strategies that align to their data-informed assessment of student needs.
- Identify equity strategies that align to each stage of the essential practices of guided pathways.

The case studies and instructional tools developed through this project will have sustained use in the field through both the wide range of support offerings carried out by Pathways Collaborative members and via dissemination throughout the broader field for use in a range of training and professional development settings.

A sample list of application opportunities includes but is not limited to:

- Training conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges at its regional workshops
- JFF's trainings for the executive directors at student success centers or state-based team workshops
- Aspen Presidential Fellowship residential seminars



# Research Design and Methods



At the outset of the project, ATD and CEP developed a case study prospectus that frames key challenges and questions, highlights learning objectives, and provides a general guiding framework and scope for the case study. Using student-outcome data collected through ATD’s Leader College network and the biennial Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence, we identified institutions that have improved outcomes for students of color and low-income students and have narrowed gaps at their colleges. From those institutions that emerged from the quantitative assessment, we then looked at qualitative information collected by both organizations to assess evidence of equity strategies. We then conducted calls with leaders to determine whether those institutions had indeed implemented strategies to explicitly address equity at scale and with intentionality as part of holistic institutional reform efforts.

In addition to looking at qualitative and quantitative indicators of effective equity practices, we intentionally sampled colleges that collectively reflect a diversity of size, geography, student demographics, and institutional mission (e.g., transfer versus vocational focus).

Through this process, we identified the following three institutions to serve as case study sites for the project:

### ***Pierce College, Washington***

Pierce College is a large, multi-campus district south of Seattle that serves a student body that is diverse in terms of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic background, and age. Pierce also serves a large veteran and active military population through a mix of transfer and vocational (Career and Technical Education) programs. The college has been nationally recognized by Aspen and ATD for its comprehensive reform efforts and strong equity agenda.

### ***Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College, Minnesota***

Fond du Lac is a small tribal college near Lake Superior in rural Minnesota. Founded in 1987 to serve the Fond du Lac Reservation community, the college has roots as a tribal college while also serving the surrounding communities through a mix of transfer and workforce programs. As such, the college is focused on advancing equity in both its honoring of its tribal mission and serving the needs of diverse students.

### ***Grayson College, Texas***

Grayson College is a relatively small, comprehensive community college in rural north-central Texas. As a member of the Achieving the Dream network, Grayson has made notable progress in improving student outcomes—particularly for Black/African American and Latinx students.



# Findings



Due to delays in receiving grant funding, and subsequent delays from COVID disruptions, the case study development is still underway. However, the following themes have emerged from the research:

- Pathways reforms are effective in “lifting all boats” but are not inherently “equity” strategies. Evidence from states that have implemented pathways reforms at scale show that rates improve for all students in key early-momentum Key Performance Indicators, but disparities between racial/ethnic student groups nonetheless persist or even increase. Addressing equity within pathways reforms thus requires intentional strategies and an “equity theory of change” for how pathways and related change efforts will directly remove barriers for historically marginalized and excluded students.

- Equity “problem definition” is critical to the development of appropriate, effective, and scaled strategies. Too often colleges adopt strategies to address generalized disparities in student outcomes that are symptoms of underlying systemic and structural inequities. The institutions profiled in these case studies offer strong examples of strategies for defining unique student needs and barriers to success, centering institutional responsibility (rather than student deficits) in designing strategies, and designing strategies for scale.
- Institutions that make progress in closing equity gaps have built capacity to be “equity-adaptive” by utilizing strong data-use systems and practices, equity-focused resource allocation processes, and professional development that builds a culture of equity-minded practice throughout the campus.

The case studies outline how each college defined its unique equity challenges, set goals, established comprehensive strategies, and built capacity to operationalize an equity focus across campus. These studies will be complemented by instructional resources that facilitate engagement with each of the key points above to help leaders understand how to shift from current incremental and intervention-focused equity strategies to holistic efforts that change structures and build capacity to remove barriers that create disparate student experiences and outcomes.

An additional relevant finding from the process of identifying case-study institutions is that, while we were able to find numerous community colleges that have made progress in closing equity gaps for Latinx students and other groups, we found fewer candidates of majority/predominantly white institutions that had significantly improved outcomes for Black and African American students.



# Conclusions

The process of identifying colleges that have achieved improved outcomes for all students while narrowing gaps for students of color was enlightening. It reinforced a sense among our organizations that there is still much work to do in helping college leaders establish equity as a priority, define equity challenges, set goals, build capacity, and implement sustained and scaled solutions. The current pandemic is only deepening the urgency with which colleges will have to respond to deep historical and structural inequalities that manifest in vastly different student experiences and opportunities in postsecondary education.

The case studies themselves are still in progress. However, we expect them to underscore the importance of a clear and explicit focus on equity as part of pathways reforms and related change efforts. We also found, through our leadership screening calls, that where progress has been made on closing equity gaps, leaders are focused on addressing equity as a holistic, systemic set of redesigns and structural changes rather than through a marginal and “equity by intervention” approach of narrow strategies.

While institutional leaders need guidance on how to address students’ most acute barriers to access and success, they also need support in identifying and benchmarking promising organizational practices for building capacity to understand the student experience and continually work to revise policy and practice. This includes support in aligning core business processes such as budgeting, human capital, and data use to formulate well-defined goals for addressing barriers that disproportionately impact students of color or low-income students.

The case studies and curricular resources developed through this project will support ATD, Aspen, and our partners’ ability to train leaders to build more equity-adaptive institutions and implement sustained, scaled, and holistic equity strategies. Both organizations are committed to continuing to learn how to best deliver this training while learning from leaders in the field and sharing effective practice. The framework we developed for the case studies will support that

future inquiry. The case studies may also highlight promising but, as of right now, empirically unproven strategies that will be ideal for future investigation and evaluation. We also expect that strategies highlighted in these case studies and common approaches to equity across the cases have implications for state- and system-level policy and leadership (e.g. in establishing data systems and metrics that support equity as a priority, and in accounting for equity in performance-based funding models).

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