

## Advancing the Study of Race, Racial Equity, and Racial Climates at America's Community Colleges

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### ABSTRACT

Like too many other topics pertaining to the study of higher education, published research on race, racial equity, and racial climates is lopsidedly situated in four-year institutional contexts. This special issue of the *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* aims to advance the study of these topics within community college contexts. Deepening understandings of racial issues at these institutions is especially urgent given the recent politicized attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion in U.S. higher education.

Most topics pertaining to the study of U.S. higher education are lopsidedly focused on four-year institutions. This trend also exists in journalism (as evidenced by the quantifiable low coverage of community colleges), high school guidance counseling (as evidenced by the postsecondary options that advisors most proudly promote and celebrate), and legislative activities (as evidenced by the types of institutions that policymakers mention by name on Capitol Hill and in other settings). Portrayals of college life on television and in movies almost always are situated in four-year campus settings. A noteworthy exception is *The Parkers*, one of my favorite TV shows of all time, which was about a Black single mother and daughter who attended Santa Monica College together.

Institutional imbalance also shows up in papers presented about colleges and universities at annual meetings of the Association for the Study of Higher Education and the American Educational Research Association. I do not know for sure, but it is possible that curricula in higher education and student affairs graduate programs remain much like the one to which classmates and I were exposed at Indiana University nearly three decades ago. Few readings, assignments, and institutional examples offered in class discussions were focused on community colleges; I comfortably estimate that at least 98% of attention was devoted to four-year institutions at that time. Hopefully, this is different now at my beloved alma mater and every place else that is preparing the next generation of higher education professionals, faculty members, and policy actors, especially given the essential role that community colleges play in our nation's educational ecosystem.

All community colleges are important, but they play a particularly valuable role in public higher education. During the 2022–23 academic school year, there were 1,599 degree-granting public post-secondary institutions in the United States – 817 were community and technical colleges, and 782 were four-year colleges and universities (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Just over one in four undergraduates (25.1%) at public institutions that year were enrolled at community colleges. Among Indigenous students in public higher education, 42.7% attended community colleges. It was 28.2% among Asian American and Pacific Islander students, 38% among Black students, and 40.2% among Latina/o students.

Broadly speaking, there are still numerous opportunities to advance the study of higher education across just about every topic: history, finance, enrollment management, curriculum and teaching, student affairs, and athletics, to name a few. This need makes the *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* (CCJRP) an exceptionally important venue for the publication of timely scholarship about one of America's most important postsecondary sectors. I have long admired this journal and Deborah L. Floyd, its esteemed editor in chief. I am enormously grateful that she afforded me this opportunity to do something meaningful that would help further advance the study of community colleges. I decided to bring together 15 colleagues to produce a collection of research-based papers on race, racial equity, and racial climates at America's community colleges.

I chose this CCJRP special issue emphasis for at least three reasons. Foremost, because these topics are solidly within my areas of expertise. Second, because I read, assign, and cite studies related to race in higher education just about every day. I know for sure that there is a quantifiably large imbalance in publications that prioritize four-year colleges and universities. And third, I founded the California Community Colleges Racial Equity Leadership Alliance five years ago, which afforded me the opportunity to work with presidents and other administrators, faculty members, and practitioners across more than 70 member institutions. I also have worked with dozens of other community colleges over the lifespan of my career. In assorted ways, most of that work has focused on race, racial equity, and racial climates. These experiences have repeatedly revealed to me how useful theories and research on these topics would be to professionals who are searching for evidence-informed solutions to racial problems on their campuses. This has always been the case, but it feels more necessary than ever right now.

The idea for this special issue predated Donald Trump's return to the White House. As a matter of fact, our project was nearly complete when the 47th president signed a stack of executive orders dismantling numerous diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives on his first day back in office. My CCJRP project was not originally conceived as a response to the now infamous "Dear Colleague" letter that the U.S. Department of Education sent to every U.S. postsecondary institution in February 2025 (Trainor, 2025). Honestly, some version of this special issue is a contribution that I have been interested in making to our field for at least a decade.

My interest in advancing the study of race and racism at community colleges, however, has increased over the past five years as I have witnessed these institutions navigate state-level politicized attacks on DEI. This has been less of an issue in California where I live and work, but more so for community colleges located in other places where DEI has been banned via state-level legislative bills or executive orders signed by governors (see Table 1). Rarely are community colleges even mentioned in the national discourse about anti-DEI policies; but yet, they too are affected alongside four-year institutions in their states. Community colleges in Texas, Florida, and Pennsylvania had to abruptly discontinue their work with colleagues and me at the USC Race and Equity Center. This occurred before Trump's second term. Since January 2025, the renaming, defunding, and eliminating of DEI activities that were occurring in fewer than half of states took a national turn as the Trump Administration's attacks on higher education began immediately affecting institutions everywhere.

To address the politicized attacks on DEI, I united 11 other scholars to produce a compendium of evidence-based essay responses (Harper & Associates, 2024). I also created the National DEI Defense Coalition, which has produced numerous no-cost assets that are intended to help people within and outside of higher education separate DEI facts from fiction.<sup>1</sup> In addition, I have published two books on the topic (Harper, 2025; Johnson & Harper, 2024) and testified in a pair of Congressional hearings that were specifically focused on eliminating DEI in education, as well as in the U.S. military, federal government, and other workplaces. Within months following the publication of this CCJRP special issue, an hourlong documentary film that I executive produced about how people on campuses are being impacted by DEI elimination efforts in higher education will be released. I acknowledge that this is not enough, as conservative efforts to completely obliterate DEI professional positions, programs, policies, and resources continue to aggressively flourish. While I did not initially set out to have this

**Table 1.** State-level anti-DEI legislative activities, 2023–2025.

Introduced <sup>a</sup>	Failed	Passed	No State Action
Connecticut	Arizona	Alabama	Alaska
Louisiana	Georgia	Arkansas	California
Missouri	Montana	Florida	Colorado
Nebraska	Oregon	Idaho	Delaware
Pennsylvania	South Carolina	Indiana	District of Columbia
Wisconsin		Iowa	Hawaii
		Kansas	Illinois
		Kentucky	Maine
		Mississippi	Maryland
		North Carolina	Massachusetts
		North Dakota	Michigan
		Ohio	Minnesota
		Oklahoma	Nevada
		Tennessee	New Hampshire
		Texas	New Jersey
		Utah	New Mexico
		West Virginia	New York
		Wyoming	Rhode Island
			South Dakota
			Vermont
			Virginia
			Washington

<sup>a</sup>Bills had been introduced in these states, but were pending legislative action at the time this *CCJRP* special issue was completed.  
Source: Chronicle Staff (2025).

special issue be part of the multidimensional body of DEI defense work that I am leading, I sincerely hope it helps.

On its own, this *CCJRP* special issue will not do enough to reverse the racial inequities that will surely emerge from state and federal attacks on DEI in higher education. Furthermore, these seven articles will not be nearly enough to fill the longstanding gap in the study of race, racial equity, and racial climates at community colleges. But I hope this contribution is somehow useful to higher education as it aims to broaden opportunity and manufacture equitable educational outcomes through research, policy, and practice. I am grateful to Dr Floyd for gifting me this opportunity and the 15 authors for generously publishing their excellent papers here. Hopefully, it will become an adaptable model for other scholars who endeavor to address additional topics that have lopsidedly focused on four-year colleges and universities.

## Note

1. See <https://race.usc.edu/coalition>.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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