



Conducting Culturally Sensitive Research in Postsecondary Career and Technical Education Contexts: A Resource Review by the CTE CoLab

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The purpose of this resource review is to provide a quick overview of culturally sensitive research practices and context for why and how colleges may consider implementing these approaches.

How Should the Resource Review Be Used?

This resource review provides information on culturally sensitive research approaches in the postsecondary career and technical education (CTE) context. It contains key takeaways from the literature and links to resources that the Urban Institute compiled to support community and technical colleges participating in the [Career and Technical Education CoLab \(CTE CoLab\)](#), a research-informed community of practice that focuses on building knowledge for the field. Colleges participating in the CTE CoLab are working to refine and implement equity action plans, which identify goals and strategies for advancing racial equity at the programmatic and institutional level aligned with the needs of their college.¹ The CTE CoLab aims to reduce disparities in academic and career outcomes for historically marginalized students—especially students who are Black, Latinx, or Indigenous—enrolled in online and hybrid postsecondary career-focused programs. The Urban Institute team developed resource reviews on mentoring, orientation, and culturally sensitive research to support colleges in implementing strategies to advance equity.

About the Resource Reviews

Each resource review features key takeaways and considerations for practitioners interested in developing and implementing postsecondary programs with an equity lens. Rather than conducting a systematic review or endorsing a particular approach, the Urban Institute has aggregated resources to provide information about where to learn more, so that readers can do a deeper dive into topics that are most interesting and relevant to them. By building on available evidence, knowledge, and experience from the field, practitioners and policymakers using this resource review can consider available options and potential approaches to address student needs and improve outcomes for students of color and other historically marginalized groups. Strategies designed to meet the needs of students who face barriers can also yield benefits for all students.

Overview

Many colleges are working to promote a sense of belonging among students of color as a strategy for advancing equity. This resource review is for college practitioners interested in learning how to measure belongingness on surveys, and more generally how to gather data on other culturally sensitive topics like stress. It provides a list of resources from the field that may be helpful.

Colleges can drive change in their programs using student surveys. Interviews and focus groups can also add depth of understanding about a topic. But while these approaches are valuable, they have limitations. Surveys, interviews, and focus groups may not always capture responses accurately on culturally sensitive topics because respondents might feel uncomfortable sharing their candid perspectives. Therefore, it is important to consider who is leading the interviews or focus groups, and how their position and identity can create a power dynamic that may make students less comfortable, which could result in harm to participants and biased responses. For example, when students are asked about their experiences, especially those that relate to aspects of their identity, they may not be comfortable sharing their perspectives with a facilitator who does not share that identity. Similarly, if the facilitator holds a position of power within the institution, students may not want to share critical or negative experiences because they worry that it could adversely affect their experience at the institution. Using community-engaged methods is one way to improve research, so that it supports and does not harm the community that is being researched.

Culturally Sensitive Research Approaches: Key Takeaways

- Understanding student experiences with stress and racism is important for designing programming that responds to student needs and creates a sense of belonging, as well as for measuring complex concepts like “belongingness” in meaningful ways.
- Community-engaged methods aim to improve research, so that it supports and does not harm the community being researched through the intentional inclusion of focus communities as cocreators, contributors, participants, and/or reviewers in the information gathering and the research process.
- Strategies for elevating student voice and for conducting community-engaged research should be authentic, culturally sensitive, and trauma-informed; they should allow for power sharing and avoid tokenization.

This resource review concludes with concrete research tools for those interested in incorporating community-engaged methods into surveys, interviews, and focus groups to better understand student experience.

Student Experiences with Stress and Racism

This section provides a short overview of how stress and racism can impact the college student experience. Because of structural racism, students of color may face additional barriers. Understanding the issues of stress and racism helps inform strategies that college staff, faculty, and administrators can use to share power authentically with students—or, at minimum, reduce harm.

- **Gap between need and utilization in mental health care:** Community college students, ages 19–22, are more likely to experience mental health challenges relative to their peers at four-year colleges, but they are less likely to use mental health services (Lipson et al. 2021).
- **Finances:** Financial stress is correlated with experiencing mental health challenges, and limited finances can be a barrier to accessing support (Lipson et al. 2021).
- **Basic needs insecurity:** Students who experience basic needs insecurity are more likely to also experience mental health issues (Broton, Mohebali, and Lingo 2022).
- **Community-building and completion:** Students who do not connect with others in community college settings are less likely to graduate (Barbatis 2010).
- **Childhood experiences:** Childhood trauma is more common for first-generation and Black college students. Students who had experienced childhood trauma are less likely to graduate (Dorvil et al. 2021; Lecy and Osteen 2022).
- **Stressful experiences while in college:** Black students in baccalaureate programs experience an average of one stressful life event a year during their four years of college (e.g., death of a close family member, parent separation or divorce, close family member being a victim of a violent crime). Meanwhile, white and Asian students, on average, experience one stressful life event over the entire four years.²
- **Racial trauma:** Black students experience a unique form of pervasive trauma based on their racial identity (Edwin and Daniels 2022).
 - » Racial trauma for Black college students at predominantly white institutions has three main components: (1) a temporal component, meaning it is experienced over time and has a lasting impact; (2) a variation by stressor component, meaning it has levels of intensity and symptoms, depending on the racist stressor; and (3) a frequency component, meaning it is repetitive and/or cyclical (i.e., racist stressors can recur as an individual experience or as a repetitive experience). Racist stressors that cause racial trauma can include a range of experiences, such as one negative police encounter or repeated microaggressions (Hargons et al. 2022).

Introduction to Community-Engaged Methods

As colleges think about ways to gain insight around culturally sensitive topics that relate to deeply held knowledge about marginalized communities (e.g., how structural racism affects students of color at colleges), they should consider applying community-engaged methods that involve students in research and learning efforts. These approaches can result in more useful insights that pose less risk to individuals because they allow students to collect and/or interpret insights from a group perspective rather than having to convey their individual complexities to an “outsider” asking probing questions. These methods could include the following:

- training and empowering students or other focus communities to carry out data collection among their peers;
- having students help interpret surveys as well as quantitative and qualitative data to draw findings, lessons, and themes; and
- sharing preliminary findings with students to get their reactions and input before acting on or more broadly sharing the findings.

Community-engaged methods involve “the intentional and explicit inclusion of studied communities as contributors, participants, and/or reviewers in the research process” (Sankofa, Daly, and Falkenburger 2021).

Engaging community members in research can improve research design and better address community needs. In addition, community-engaged methods can work to advance equity. In the past, often research has been extractive and has excluded marginalized populations, especially people of color, from the research process. Sharing power with community members makes the research better by allowing researchers to build on community expertise and collect more accurate findings (Sankofa, Daly, and Falkenburger 2021).

- Community-engaged methods can also incorporate **trauma-informed principles and strategies** to acknowledge community trauma and stressors. A model for trauma-informed community engagement builds on the following principles: approach work from structural frame/social justice lens, do no harm, practice acceptance, advance community empowerment, and commit to long-term sustainability (Falkenburger, Arena, and Wolin 2018).

These research and learning activities do not need to be used only for a formal research process; they can be used for ongoing program assessment activities and informal self-reviews that may already be standard practice at colleges and in college programs.

Considerations for Community-Engaged Methods in the College Context

Community colleges may already be familiar with some of the informal practices that make programming and policy discussions more student-centered, such as elevating student voice. However, there are several important principles to ensure that practices are culturally sensitive, rather than extractive or tokenizing. Below are some resources and principles for better engaging and power sharing with students in research and information-seeking efforts.

The *Creating Space for Student Voice in Advancing Program Review* from the Office of Community College Research and Leadership (OCCRL)³ presents a framework for incorporating student voice into program review. Below are a few of its components:

- **“Space:** Students must be provided a space in which they are encouraged to express their views. The space must be inclusive and a location in which the voices of diverse student populations are solicited and participation is open to all. Students must also be protected from penalty when speaking their mind.
- **Voice:** Students with a wide range of views must be encouraged and enabled to express their thoughts and should be reminded of the opportunity to express them freely.
- **Audience:** Students must be provided with the opportunity to share their views to those who have a responsibility to listen and take action if it is warranted.
- **Influence:** Action must be considered and possibly taken in response to student views after analyzing all viewpoints. Students should be informed of what actions were taken as a result of their views and be notified about how their thoughts were regarded” (Thrill 2019, iv).

Youth engagement resources provide the following helpful tips that could be applicable for engaging college students:

- **Several stages where students can provide input** include defining research questions, designing data collection instruments, collecting the data, and analyzing the data (Scott, Sirois, and Spaulding 2023).
- **Principles for engagement include** compensating participants for their time, providing training and resources to support quality data collection, engaging students in all aspects of the process, and clearly informing students about how the research will be used (Scott, Sirois, and Spaulding 2023).
- **Strategies for gathering and using feedback can include one-on-one meetings, small group discussions or focus groups, and regular surveys.** Following are some key principles for these methods (Scott, Sirois, and Spaulding 2023):
 - » Only ask for what you have the capacity to receive and use.

- » Plan how you will use feedback from the beginning.
 - » Plan how you will close the loop with participants about how you used their feedback.
 - » Calibrate the way you ask for feedback. If honest or sensitive feedback is required, make sure the person engaging the participant does not have personal interest in the feedback.
 - » Value participants' contribution by compensating, thanking, or offering other kinds of appreciation.
- **Additional considerations for codesigning—or power sharing—with individuals with lived experience include the following:**
 - » Compensate participants for sharing their lived expertise.
 - » Let go of your power and share authority.
 - » Deepen relationships with people with lived experience or sustain and create meaningful relationships with them.

Shift your mind-set to codesigning. Think about how ready you are to shift power to the community, and address your own culture and values as needed (Rudd et al. 2022).

Community-Engaged Methods in Practice

Resources for Beginning Your Own Community-Engaged Research

For colleges considering using student surveys, interviews, or focus groups, the following resources may be helpful when thinking about how and when to conduct the research and who to engage in the work.

Eona Harrison, Matthew Mizota, Hannah Daly, and Elsa Falkenburger, *Community-Engaged Surveys: From Research Design to Analysis and Dissemination* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021).

- Consider before launching survey work, the goals of the survey; who you are trying to reach with the survey; and how you will define the community of interest, incorporate community feedback, and adequately compensate the community members.
- Decide how you will engage the community; for example, by working with a small group of community members, presenting individual work sessions where community members develop the surveys themselves, or conducting larger group discussions to gather input on the survey.
- Engage the community in four main phases of research: contextualizing the research, developing the survey, implementing the survey, and analyzing the survey results.
- Develop the survey by piloting it with small groups and making edits reflecting community feedback. Prioritize what parts of the survey you would like feedback on. Consider adding questions that are of interest to the community, even if they are not directly related to the research project. Think about how you will select a representative group to pilot or test the survey and how you will receive their feedback.
- Analyze the results with community members. Think about how the community can engage in data analysis; for example, consider creating [Data Walks](#) (Murray, Falkenburger, and Saxena 2015).
- Respect participants' time and treat them as experts. Review the *Equitable Compensation for Community Engagement Guidebook* (Langness et al. 2023).

Community Power and Policy Partnerships Program, “[Surveys](#),” in *Transformative Research Toolkit* (Berkeley, CA: Othering & Belonging Institute, 2023), 111–16.

- Surveys are useful in determining the extent to which an experience or belief is widespread.
- Surveys allow wide input but less depth/connection than qualitative methods (e.g., interviews and focus groups).
- It is best practice to create multiple drafts of the surveys.
- When considering who will be conducting the survey, keep in mind that people are more likely to respond to researchers who share similar experiences or identities with them.

- Consider analyzing the data in a participatory manner.

Community Power and Policy Partnerships Program, “Interviews,” in *Transformative Research Toolkit* (Berkeley, CA: Othering & Belonging Institute, 2023), 71–78.

- Interviews are helpful for providing in-depth insights, but they are not as generalizable as surveys.
- Interviews can be valuable for deepening community relationships, and the data from interviews can help elevate stories (with consent).
- There are various methods of interview design, from structured to personal narrative/oral history storytelling. When deciding on methods, consider the community context, values, and the interview participants’ preferences.
- Keep your own positionality in mind when analyzing interview data and collaborate with a diverse team to reduce bias.

Community Power and Policy Partnerships Program, “Focus Groups,” in *Transformative Research Toolkit* (Berkeley, CA: Othering & Belonging Institute, 2023), 79–84.

- Focus groups can be used to understand nuance, generate potential ideas or solutions, build visions, and understand community priorities.
- Develop a topic guide for focus groups. Keep the list of questions short. Make questions concise, clear, and open-ended. The goal of a focus group is to generate discussion among participants.
- Find a skilled facilitator who is a member of the community.
 - » Note that a community “insider” will be more trusted, but they may need to get the focus group members to spell out specific issues and not assume that group participants inherently understand each other.

Additional Resources

Resources about Structural Racism at Community Colleges

Elise Colin, Daniel López, and Shayne Spaulding, “[Present-Day Experiences of Students of Color at Community Colleges](#)” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2023).

- Highlights the importance of access to helpful faculty; relevant and rigorous curriculum; employment and career assistance; social, emotional, and mental health care; and basic needs supports.

Theresa Anderson, Amanda Briggs, Shayne Spaulding, Eboni Zamani-Gallaher, and Daniel López, “[Racial and Ethnic Equity Gaps in Postsecondary Career and Technical Education](#)” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021).

- Describes equity gaps for students of color in CTE programs and offers a framework for improving outcomes at the course, program, and institutional levels.

Edith Lewis, “[How to Create a Sense of Belonging for Black Students in a Majority White Academy](#),” *Times Higher Education*, February 15, 2022.

- Provides a concrete list of strategies for building belongingness and inclusion in the classroom and throughout a teaching institution.⁴

Resources about Community Engagement

John Sankofa, Hannah Daly, and Elsa Falkenburger, *[Community Voice and Power Sharing Guidebook](#)* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021).

- Covers community-engagement topics for those beginning community-engagement work.
- Details how community-engaged methods can improve relationships with communities and the quality of the research itself.

Community Power and Policy Partnerships Program, *[Transformative Research Toolkit](#)* (Berkeley, CA: Othering & Belonging Institute, 2023).

- Clarifies that “in a nutshell, transformative research is any research process that positively transforms the people directly involved, the communities they are part of, and the structures shaping their lives” (p. 8).
- Recognizes and acknowledges harm that has been exacerbated by past research and seeks to provide resources for shifting to transformative research.

- See details of different elements of the toolkit in the “Resources for Beginning Your Own Community-Engaged Research” section above.

Kristine Andrews, Jenita Parekh, and Shantai Peckoo, “A Guide to Incorporating a Racial and Ethnic Equity Perspective throughout the Research Process” (Rockville, MD: Child Trends, 2019).

- Focuses more on the research process itself but provides insights into opportunities to promote inclusion of racially marginalized individuals and communities at different stages of the process.
- Defines key concepts related to racial and ethnic equity.

Lisa M. Vaughn and Farrah Jacquez, “Participatory Research Methods—Choice Points in the Research Process,” *Journal of Participatory Research Methods* 1, no. 1 (2020).

- Provides a framework of various participatory research approaches, including education action research.
- Emphasizes points in the research process where choices to collaborate and empower community stakeholders can improve both research and communities.

Elsa Falkenburger, Olivia Arena, and Jessica Wolin, “Trauma-Informed Community Building and Engagement” (Washington DC: Urban Institute, 2018).

- Gives examples of incorporating trauma-informed principles into community-engaged research.

Survey Resources

The following survey instruments may provide a useful place to start when developing questionnaires on culturally sensitive topics.

Career and Technical Education CoLab, “CTE CoLab CCP Student Survey Considerations” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, n.d.).

- Offers survey tips and questions to consider before beginning the survey, including the following fundamental questions:
 - » What do you want to know?
 - » Which students do you want to reach?
 - » When and how do you plan to administer the survey?
 - » What is the right content?
 - » Are special accommodations needed for students to respond?
 - » Is protecting student confidentiality important for this survey?
 - » How will you make sense of the findings?

- » Who will you share the findings with?
- Includes sample survey questions on the following topics:
 - » program and college access
 - » digital access
 - » digital literacy
 - » access to student supports
 - » student characteristics
 - » learning online
 - » course structure
 - » course technology tools
 - » expectations in coursework
 - » overall challenges
 - » education/employment outcomes

Career and Technical Education CoLab, “[Student Survey Examples](#)” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, n.d.).

- This document includes three examples of student surveys developed by colleges participating in the CTE CoLab.

Center for Postsecondary Research, “[National Survey of Student Engagement](#)” (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University School of Education, 2013).

- **Full survey** covers the following topics:
 - » participation in education activities
 - » coursework perceptions
 - » college environment perceptions
 - » education and personal growth
 - » demographic information
- Includes questions related to [student sense of belonging](#). Asks students to agree or disagree with statements such as the following:
 - » “I feel comfortable being myself at this institution.”
 - » “I feel valued by this institution.”
 - » “I feel like part of the community at this institution.”

Sara Goldrick-Rab, Christine Baker-Smith, Vanessa Coca, and Elizabeth Looker, [#RealCollege: Guide to Assessing Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education](#) (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, The Hope Center, 2019).

- Appendix A: Food Security Module

- Appendix B: Housing Insecurity and Homelessness Module
- Appendix C: Other Survey Questions Used in the Hope Center's #RealCollege Survey

University of Texas at Austin, "[Community College Survey of Student Engagement \(CCSSEE\)](#)" (Austin, TX: University of Texas at Austin, 2017).

- Surveys covering additional topics, such as technology and the student experience, can be found on the [CCSSEE website](#).

Digital Promise, [Equity in Digital Learning Student Survey](#) (Boulder, CO: Every Learner Everywhere, 2022).

- Includes questions on types of coursework, perception of coursework, experiences with instructors, experiences with peers, expected course outcome, and technology use.

Notes

- ¹ “Advancing Racial Equity in Hybrid and Online Career and Technical Education (CTE) Programs: A Summary of Equity Action Plans in the CTE CoLab Initiative” captures the work of a previous cohort, which ran from June 2021 to April 2023. It can be found at the CTE CoLab website, <https://ctecolab.org>.
- ² Camille Charles, interviewed by Jeffrey R. Young, “Why Class Diversity Can Be ‘Invisible’ at Colleges,” EdSurge Podcast, July 18, 2023, <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2023-07-18-why-class-diversity-can-be-invisible-at-colleges>.
- ³ Chauntee Thrill, “Creating a Space for Student Voice in Advancing Program Review.” Champaign, IL: Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. July 2019. <https://occr1.illinois.edu/docs/librariesprovider2/program-review/creating-a-space-for-student-voice-in-advancing-program-review.pdf>.
- ⁴ Edith Lewis, “How to Create a Sense of Belonging for Black Students in a Majority White Academy,” Times Higher Education, February 15, 2022, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/how-create-sense-belonging-black-students-majority-white-academy>.

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