

## Chapter 6

# Building a Framework for Transformation in Higher Education: Leadership Lessons in Emancipatory Education

**Heather Lattimer**

*San José State University, USA*

**Marcos Pizarro**

*San José State University, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

*In this chapter, the authors share their experiences leading transformation in the Connie L. Lurie College of Education at San José State University in California. They ground their work in an emancipatory education framework that recognizes the histories of inequity, racism, and white supremacy in higher education and centers the voices and experiences of those who have historically been marginalized. Arguing that emancipatory work must move from words to actions, the authors reflect on moments of decision and leadership choices that have moved the culture and norms in the college and refocused the work to consistently prioritize equity in the college's policies and practices.*

*“What we do is more important than what we say or what we say we believe.” -bell hooks*

### **INTRODUCTION**

When we arrived at San José State University in 2018 and 2019 to serve as Dean and Associate Dean, we found a college that was committed to social justice in principle, but had not fully come together as

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7152-1.ch006

a community to interrogate what that principle meant in policy and practice and how it was manifested in the daily life of the college. There were individuals who were doing great social justice work in their research and individual courses, departments that were running programs with a curricular focus on social justice, and an overall commitment to equity that was meaningful. However, while social justice was something that faculty and staff felt aligned with, the college had not established comprehensive practices and policies that acknowledged and confronted past and ongoing inequities and actively moved all of us toward social and racial justice.

This reality is, of course, not unusual. Many colleges and universities similarly use terms such as “social justice,” “equity,” diversity,” “inclusion,” and increasingly, “anti-racist” in position statements and recruitment literature, but have neglected the hard work of engaging in the challenging conversations and deep interrogation needed to change culture, policies, and practices. This disconnect is rarely due to poor intent or a lack of desire to live up to these aspirational claims; it is more typically the result of the challenge of working and making change in large, complex organizations that are designed to maintain the status quo (Kezar & Posselt, 2020), and the on-going legacy of entrenched institutional and ideological systems that maintain fundamental inequities. Examples of this disconnect abound and are reflected in a disinterest and an inability to shift everything from problematic student admissions policies to stated and unstated tenure and promotion guidelines.

In the intervening years we’ve engaged in deep conversations with faculty, staff, students, and community partners around what it means to be a college that is committed to principles like equity, inclusion, social and racial justice and anti-racism. Our strategic planning was an essential part of this process as it brought together constituent groups from across departments and programs to share the important work they were already doing and set bold goals for the future of the college. The resulting strategic plan called on the college to take an “emancipatory approach across our teaching, scholarship, and service” and pushed us to become “community engaged, interdisciplinary, culturally sustaining, and holistic” in all aspects of our work. The working group that led the strategic planning for the college, which included students, staff and faculty across all departments and programs, was energized to build and then later implement a plan that both acknowledged the on-going work in the college and challenged all of us to be explicit and precise in our social and racial justice goals and practices. To center the strategic planning work in the daily life of the college, the working group developed an internal grant process to support the planning and implementation of initiatives aligned with strategic plan priorities, which helped colleagues, often across departments, bring the words of the strategic plan to life in ways that would have immediate impacts on students, families and communities. Simultaneously, other formal and informal projects emerged:

- Faculty and staff “theory to action” groups reading and discussing works from Bettina Love (2019), Ibram X. Kendi (2019), Django Paris and Samy Alim (2017), and others
- Student-led research and social media campaigns that strengthen community engagement and amplify student voice
- Redesigned outreach, recruitment, and student scholarship processes to increase access of historically underserved students and communities to our educator preparation programs
- Intensive community outreach and partnership with local K12 districts and community colleges that share similar social justice priorities
- Restructuring of our leadership team to prioritize a focus on equity and inclusion

### ***Building a Framework for Transformation in Higher Education***

- Significant work at the department level to review curriculum, admissions and advising policies, and assessment and evaluations procedures as we seek to better understand the multi-layered impacts of our policies and practices and ensure coherence with our values.

Engaging in this work has forced us to seek collective clarity in how we understand and frame the multiple labels we have already used in this chapter for our goals, including: equity, inclusion, anti-racism, social justice, and racial justice. As we have sought to live the goals of the strategic plan, we have come to intentionally frame our efforts to address histories of inequity, racism and white supremacy in higher education as engaging in emancipatory education (the term we will center in the rest of this chapter). This approach responds to the historical and on-going focus on addressing inequity through statements and multicultural brochures rather than an active engagement in daily practices that directly confront the ways in which institutions of higher education participate in the oppression of disenfranchised communities. The barrage of higher education statements claiming anti-racist stances in the summer of 2020, often without subsequent changes in policy, practice, climate or culture, reflects this reality. In claiming an emancipatory approach, we begin with a commitment to a process that we are always engaged in, in every facet of our daily work in the college. This process of emancipatory education is always built on the acknowledgement that educational institutions have been and continue to be intentionally designed to maintain inequality and have been so deeply shaped by racism and white supremacy that many do not see the ways in which the processes that they engage in as regular university practice further inequality. So emancipatory education constantly exposes what racism and oppression look like in our college, recognizing that historical practices can seem natural even when it is apparent that they do not support our goals of upending inequality. Emancipatory education is engaged in with the recognition that exposing racism is not sufficient, as we also commit to building policies, practices and a college climate and culture that replaces existing systems with a culturally sustaining and revitalizing approach that puts the wisdom and insights of BIPOC and other disenfranchised communities at the center of our college. Furthermore, emancipatory education is by definition collective. As we describe later in this chapter, it requires that we build a community committed to these processes that is, necessarily based on relationship building. As leaders in the college, we recognize that this relationship building must center radical listening where all members of the college are heard and their experiences, analysis, and needs are understood through their histories and positionalities as we strive to build a community that holistically commits to a shared emancipatory approach, knowing that centering the histories, experiences, and needs of those to whom we owe an educational debt (Ladson-Billings, 2005) is the heart of relationship building and listening in emancipatory education. Finally, as we also discuss later, emancipatory education requires a radical form of trust-building where all stakeholders understand that they are seen, acknowledged, and also can be “called in” to challenge themselves and grow as part of this work.

This is an emerging and working model of emancipatory education that we are building alongside our colleagues. It requires continual critical self-evaluation and inclusive decision making, given that the decisions we make as leaders in the college shape specific policies and practices, have a direct impact on the lives of faculty, staff, and students, and transmit values that shape the culture of the college and influence how others make decisions within their spheres of influence (Schein, 2010). Posselt, Hernandez, & Villareal remind us that power flows up from bottom to top as well, building as “an accumulation of micro actions through time and space, whether intentionally or not, to reinforce or transform our wider social conditions” (2020, p.48).

Of course, it is important to recognize that as leaders of a college that serves approximately 2,000 undergraduate and graduate students, we are operating within the context of a large university campus that serves approximately 35,000 students, public university system that serves more than 480,000 students, and culture of higher education with a long history of maintaining status and privilege for those who already have it and allowing injustices and inequities to persist (see, for example, Wilder, 2013; Kezar, 2010). This context has significant influence in shaping and constraining the decisions that we make.

In this chapter, we share examples of specific decision points that we've encountered as leaders in the college during our early years of leadership. We describe our context and considerations as we have sought to use our privilege and power as decision makers to strengthen the college's emancipatory education work. We reflect on the personal and the political by outlining the choices available to us, the biases and histories that we bring to our leadership in making those decisions, the context and implications of possible approaches, and the impact, both internal and external, of our actions. Our decisions have certainly not been perfect and there have been challenges and push back along the way—sometimes spurred because we are confronting and challenging existing power asymmetries that cause discomfort and even anger from those who have benefitted from those asymmetries; other times because we were inelegant in our communication, ineffective in our process, or simply wrong in our decisions. We share these decision points not as exemplars, but as examples of the kinds of challenges that we all must confront as leaders seeking to transform institutions through emancipatory approaches.

### **Setting Expectations: Hiring an Associate Dean**

Heather: An early decision point was the selection of an associate dean. We started the 2018-19 academic year with an interim associate dean who stepped down mid-way through the fall semester. At this point our college leadership team was significantly understaffed, we had a major state credentialing agency accreditation deadline fast approaching, and, as someone who had come to the university from outside the California State University system, I was still getting up to speed on the particulars of administrative processes within the institution. Additionally, I was still getting to know the people in the college. During the first two months of my tenure, I had met with every department and program and met individually with every faculty member, but I was still uncovering a long, and sometimes fraught, history that strongly impacted relationships, expectations, and norms in the college.

We launched a fast track search for a new associate dean that invited both internal and external applicants. Each of the four finalists offered unique strengths that could benefit the college, but there were clear differences among them. The search committee met to share their insights the day before the campus closed for the winter holidays and there was pressure to make a decision, and an offer, quickly. The feedback that was shared both formally and informally led me to be more deliberative.

It was clear that this decision represented an inflection point for the college. Given the pressures we were facing as a unit, there were many who wanted an institutionalist, someone who could lead us safely through accreditation and make sure that we followed appropriate campus policies. These voices were often more senior and typically more vocal. There were other members of our community, however, that were encouraged by candidates whose strengths were grounded in research and teaching that challenge the status quo. These candidates had not come through traditional teacher preparation pathways and didn't bring immediate familiarity with accreditation, but they offered questions and perspectives that could push us to grow and change. The voices that supported these candidates were quieter and more cautious.

## ***Building a Framework for Transformation in Higher Education***

These were the voices that had often experienced marginalization both within and beyond the college. They held hope and optimism for change, but didn't yet trust that they could feel confident in that hope.

Over the winter holidays I reflected on the decision ahead as well as my own priorities and biases. I am a white woman of privilege who came through a very traditional academic and career pathway. After college, I immediately went into a graduate program and then started teaching high school in a large urban district. I approached that first job with a certain amount of arrogance, believing that with hard work and well-crafted lesson plans I would be able to successfully engage the students in my classroom. I was quickly humbled. I soon figured out that if I wanted to be effective as a classroom teacher, I needed to be willing to shed my assumptions and learn to really listen to my students, their families, and the other adults they considered to be mentors.

Seeking out and listening to the perspectives and priorities of others, especially members of our community who may have been silenced or marginalized, is a value that I have tried to carry with me throughout my career. It is also a critically important approach for those of us engaging in emancipatory work. Attending to the viewpoints and perspectives of others, gleaned through both verbal and nonverbal communication as well as recognizing the ways in which marginalization and intersecting forms of oppression have shaped their lived experiences, allows leaders to exercise judgement in large and small decisions that can lead to transformative change (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 2011).

Furthermore, it was critically important for me to attend to my own positionality and privilege as I considered the decision. In the introduction of their edited volume on higher education leadership for social justice and equity, Kezar and Posselt, both of whom are also white women, write, "Awareness of our own identities and the related matrix of privileges and disempowerment enables perspective-taking, as well as empathy and solidarity in the pursuit of judgement and wisdom. Self knowledge also attunes us to our potential for biases and other cognitive blinders, as well as areas in which we have assets and resources we may draw upon to expand opportunities where it is inequitably distributed" (2020, p. 13).

Reflecting on the many perspectives I had heard in the associate dean search process, thinking about my own positionality and identity, and considering the collective priorities of the college community made it very clear which decision was right for the college. Choosing to hire Dr. Marcos Pizarro, professor and chair of SJSU's Chicana and Chicano Studies Department, to be the associate dean in the College of Education was not a conventional choice, but it was absolutely the right choice. Marcos brings to the college a perspective that challenges the status quo. His scholarship elevates the voices of those who have been marginalized by educational structures grounded in a colonialist frame. His identity as a Chicano with a strong history of activism affirms and supports many of our students, faculty, staff, and community partners who have previously felt marginalized in the college. His experience in education and academia does not mirror, but rather complements, my own; together we have become partners and allies in working toward transformative change within the college and in the larger community.

The decision to hire Marcos also communicated an important message to our colleagues in the college. For those who had been cautious about hoping for change, it helped to build trust. For those who were accustomed to the status quo, it signaled that change was coming. And for those who were in leadership positions in departments and programs across the college it modeled a process by which to consider change in our organizational culture (Schein, 2010). Psychologist, R.L. Sternberg (1990) theorized that "wisdom focuses on what is good for the collective, in the long term, in weighing a multitude of factors, being sensitive to the interests of others and emotionally connected, that enables, empowers, or brings resilience to others, and what is moral or ethically appropriate" (Kezar & Posselt, 2020, p.9). Hiring Marcos was an early and important decision that set a foundation for making future decisions that focus

on the collective, prioritize the long term, weigh a multitude of factors, understand the interests of others, and lead the college in emancipatory education.

## **Building Trust: Relational Accountability and Transformative Leadership**

Marcos: As a first-generation Chicano college student, it was only through relationships that I developed the strategies and found the support necessary for me to make it through college. I brought a toxic level of imposter syndrome into and through my early years in college that made me convinced that I neither belonged in the university nor had the right to ask for help. The formal processes of the university, including the limited supports that were available, did nothing to address this reality and, in fact, only reinforced these feelings, leading me and other students of Color<sup>1</sup> to blame ourselves for challenges that were not our responsibility. Over time, however, other students, staff, and faculty of Color committed to relationships with me that were honest and meaningful and were about who I was as a person from a specific family and community (and not just who I was as a student). These people supported me because of the *cariño*<sup>2</sup> they brought to our relationship. That is, they cared for me in a profound way that felt like they were family, deeply committed to my overall wellbeing. In so doing, we built a sense of *confianza* that was exactly what I needed to thrive in the university. This deep, shared trust allowed me to know that they would always support me on my path and helped me understand that I was not the only one dealing with imposter syndrome. Their caring and trust made it possible for me to create a space for engaging in meaningful racial justice work that I had never known possible, and in turn to eventually thrive in my undergraduate education.

Those experiences directly align with my own teaching, research, and community work. In that work—teaching in Chicana Studies, researching the strengths of and challenges faced by teachers of Color, and developing transformative models of engaging historically marginalized Latinx students—I have learned the power and necessity of centering relationships in racial and social justice work. In my practice, I understand that relationships are the foundation, and that deep caring and trust-building are required both for meaningful relationships and for creating a community culture of committed racial justice praxis.

To be even more specific, our research into the strengths of justice-oriented teachers of Color (Kohli & Pizarro, 2015) highlighted the relational accountability that is often at the heart of their approach to the vocation. Teachers of Color often hold themselves accountable to their students and their families and communities above all else in their daily classroom practice. While they have the same standards and professional responsibilities as their colleagues, they also demand of themselves that they center their responsibility to support the holistic well-being of students of Color, their families and communities. They have familial-like ties to students, families and communities that require them to build long-term relationships leading to holistic student engagement and success in their classes.

This long introduction and the journey that it recounts is the foundation for my own racial justice leadership. These insights and lessons have become part of who I am as a person and I have made the conscious commitment to bring them into who I am as an educational leader. As I moved from almost 20 years as a Chicana Studies faculty member into the role of Associate Dean of the College of Education, I brought a wealth of experience and expertise, but I also knew that mattered little if I did not build meaningful relationships with my new colleagues in the college. In my work as a leader, I recognize that racial justice is not a product, but rather a process and way of being in the world. My elders, who lived through racial oppression that I cannot even imagine, modeled these ways of being for generations and

## ***Building a Framework for Transformation in Higher Education***

one of the greatest obstacles to our racial justice goals in higher education is the fact that we have not shifted our ways of being and often only adjusted the rhetoric that frames our goals.

For me, racial justice has looked like learning about colleagues and who they are as people, who they bring with them into their work, and what they care most deeply about. It includes learning about their strengths as people and as leaders, acknowledging and appreciating those strengths, and highlighting them for others whenever possible. It also encompasses a recognition of how hard their jobs are, how committed they are, and how challenging it is for me to ask more of them at times. I understand that I cannot make those requests until I have laid the foundation just described.

In addition, I have to give of myself in this process. *Confianza* is not a one-way street, but rather is nurtured through mutual commitment to the relationship. I have to share how I have struggled, how I have fallen short, how I am seeking growth, and how I need their support. I accepted the Associate Dean position in our college of education because Heather made it clear that she shared a similar commitment to racial justice, and was driven by her own sense of relational accountability to the communities that had for so long been marginalized by institutions like ours.

One of the greatest challenges we faced as leaders was to meet the disparate needs of white faculty and BIPOC faculty during and after the spring of 2020 as the country and higher educational institutions were being asked to explicitly commit to anti-racist work. The personal, psychic toll of the rebellion on so many of us was often overwhelming, particularly as it reflected experiences and struggles that we had been fighting for many years and which had been fought in our families and communities for generations. So many of the BIPOC faculty that we supported simply needed a space to be seen and understood without having to center or cater to whiteness. At the same time, white faculty were seeking a space to grow and deepen their racial justice commitments, to be understood through those commitments and to be in solidarity with their BIPOC colleagues. Like many institutions across the country we had Zoom gatherings to build community and create space for us all to consider how we were going to move forward and address our needs to pursue collective anti-racist and abolitionist work. These efforts were important, but they exposed the fundamental tension that we couldn't meet the needs of white faculty and BIPOC faculty at the same time in the same forum. White faculty had to reckon with their positionality within white supremacy in ways that, for some, challenged their professional identities. While many stepped back and used our gatherings as an opportunity to listen to and affirm BIPOC colleagues, others were compelled (perhaps unconsciously) to prove their commitment to their colleagues. In so doing, even as they acknowledged the importance of our work to build collective, anti-racist approaches, they focused attention on themselves, which worked directly against the needs of BIPOC faculty who sought a space to be acknowledged for the burdens they had been forced to carry, for the lack of recognition of this reality, and for the necessity of centering their professional expertise in moving toward more holistic, emancipatory stances in our work. This was a powerful dilemma, because we knew that we had to meet the needs of both communities, that they were equally important to our collective efforts, and that we could not do this as a collective.\*

Navigating this was a minefield for me as I had my own needs shaped by my personal and familial history, my professional journey and the way my own expertise had been challenged by colleagues, and the sense of relational accountability I felt to BIPOC students, families and communities who I understood as family. In the subsequent weeks after our Zoom gathering, all of my work to support both BIPOC faculty and white faculty was centered on relationships. I had conversations with individual faculty and groups of faculty in which I had to listen deeply, get clarity on their experiences and needs, affirm those experiences and needs, to share stories and examples from my own life and offer support while also

posing challenges. These conversations were challenging. I had to bear witness to the pain of so many BIPOC colleagues who I admired and respected, while not being able to offer immediate solutions and wondering if long-term solutions would be possible. I also had to strive to understand that historical moment through the eyes and experiences of white colleagues who so deeply needed to be understood and seen for their commitment to racial justice, and I had to both show them that they were seen, but also challenge them to understand that they could not center themselves in our larger community in that moment (see Love [2019] for an in-depth analysis of moving from allyship to accompliceship).

I recognized that these relationships were fraught and tenuous, but they were also the foundation of the larger emancipatory project that we sought to build with our colleagues. I also understood that this work (each and every conversation) was essential and that, despite the time required, we had to continue to build relationships if we were going to grow as a collective and truly engage in emancipatory work that would be meaningful to our students. In addition to the many conversations we had, a strategy that Heather and I used to push our work forward was messages sent to the entire college. We used these messages to speak to white faculty and to BIPOC faculty without explicitly saying that. We sought to let our BIPOC faculty know they were seen, that they mattered, that they were at the center of who we are as a college, and also to let our white faculty know that they were needed in this work, that they had a unique responsibility in the work, and to even pose specific challenges that they could meet, knowing that they would be difficult and that some white faculty would have to support and bring along their white peers. This was messy and often painful work and we are still learning from all of these colleagues and seeking their support and insights in mapping an emancipatory path that we can all follow as a collective.

As we push for new and substantive racial justice commitments in our college, it comes from and through these relationships and the subsequent requests of faculty, chairs and staff in the college to commit in immediate and long-term ways to racial justice, often beyond what they have been doing during their careers. We do this as partners, acknowledging the difficulty, highlighting our collective strengths, and always modeling racial justice practices in direct ways.

### **Leaning Into Our Values: Re-Imagining a Leadership Degree Program**

Heather: Building trust and relationships with colleagues throughout the college, as Marcos describes above, helped to create a foundation for challenging, emancipatory-focused conversations as we have worked collaboratively to interrogate policies and practices across the college. Discussions around substantive changes to admissions processes, curricular changes, community outreach, and program design have hinged on establishing both a vision for the work and a sense of trust within the community that have allowed people to lean into our values and explore new possibilities that move us beyond the either/or, winners/losers frame that typically limits the opportunity for transformative change in higher education. Programmatic changes in the college's Educational Leadership department offer an example of how these transformative efforts have taken place.

For many years, the department had offered a combined master's degree and administrative credential required for K12 school leaders in the state of California. This had long been the only program in the department and in recent years had suffered significant declines in enrollment. The declining enrollment phenomenon was not unique to SJSU. Across the state, university-based administrative credential programs had taken a significant hit as alternative certification routes took root. School districts, county offices of education, charter schools, and independent organizations authorized by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (CTC) were able to provide faster and less expensive pathways to earning an

## ***Building a Framework for Transformation in Higher Education***

administrative credential. Enrollment declines had caused some of our faculty to leave, with tenure-track faculty departing to other departments on campus or other universities out of fear that SJSU's Educational Leadership Department would close all together and many lecturers opting to go work for the credential program offered through our local County Office of Education. By the Fall of 2018, there were fewer than 20 students enrolled in the whole department. These low numbers were clearly not sustainable. So the college faced a choice: Do we close the department and cede our role in the preparation and professional growth of educational leaders to outside entities? Do we double down on the current program, invest in outreach and marketing, find ways to reduce costs, and hope to hold on? Or, do we reimagine the possibilities of what a school leadership program could be?

Although financially appealing - and an option encouraged by others in university administration, closing the department was unthinkable. SJSU was founded as the first public university west of the Mississippi and we began as a normal school. The roots of the university in the preparation of educators run deep and giving up on a core component of that work—the preparation of school leaders—would have been giving in to neoliberal privatization trends in education and ceding a critical role that public universities can and must play. Furthermore, as the region's leading preparer of teachers, school counselors, speech language pathologists, and other education professionals, we are keenly aware that much of their success depends on the leadership in their schools. Teacher efficacy and retention, particularly for teachers of color, is heavily dependent on the support and leadership of the principal (Carver-Thomas, 2018). If we want the graduates from our other programs to succeed, we need to ensure that we are actively engaged in preparing school leaders and setting expectations for educational leadership that prioritizes emancipatory education.

Some within the department were advocating for maintaining the status quo. They argued that the program had a strong history and that with additional marketing efforts and financial incentives we might be able to attract enough students to support future cohorts. I understood the desire to believe in this possibility; faculty within the program had worked hard to design the current courses and they were proud of alumni who filled leadership positions around the region. The contextual concerns that had led to the current enrollment crisis, however, couldn't be ignored or wished away. Furthermore, it was appropriate to ask if that program, designed to appeal to as broad an audience of future administrators as possible, was still relevant and responsive in the current environment. In our college and across our region there was increasing urgency to engage in transformative work; a principal preparation program that addressed change at the margins didn't seem to meet the needs of the moment.

In the summer of 2019, we gathered department faculty for a half-day, off-site retreat. We began by talking about values and priorities. What values were at the center of their work? What was their vision for the future of K12 schooling? What understandings and qualities did K12 school leaders need to make that vision a reality? Beginning with values allowed us to move away from the binary—keep the current program or close it—and open a space to imagine new possibilities. We then encouraged faculty to dream. We liberated them from the expectation that they meet external requirements imposed by the CTC and asked them to design a program that directly responded to the values and priorities around equity and justice that they had just articulated. We grounded the work in the literature connected to our college-wide strategic plan conversations and invited input from current students, alums, and our K12 regional partners. We encouraged faculty to design for the nontraditional principal candidate—the educator of color who has a deep connection with their students and has demonstrated strong leadership potential, but is frustrated by the system and tempted to leave. What learning experiences and outcomes will support this candidate? How can we provide them with the knowledge and skills needed to not just

succeed within the system but to fundamentally change it? How can we train these leaders to become K12 partners in our work of emancipatory education?

The result of the conversations started at that retreat is the Emancipatory School Leadership Master's Degree program (see <https://www.sjsu.edu/edleadership/academics/emancipatory-leadership.php>). Launched in summer 2020, the program is designed for emerging K12 school leaders who are committed to an emancipatory approach to leadership that centers historically marginalized K12 students. Thanks to an executive order from the CSU Chancellor's Office in response to our request, the program offers partial credit toward the degree to students who have completed their administrative credential through an approved alternative certification route. This approach leverages the contextual realities of alternative certification pathways to our advantage, allowing local districts and the county office of education to do the foundational work of offering administrative credentials and liberating us to focus on engaging with emerging leaders who are ready to commit to becoming agents of transformation. The program itself bridges theory and practice through a living case study approach that teaches these emerging leaders to deconstruct power systems, challenge inequitable practices and policies, and cultivate community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

Stepping back from the immediate focus on our enrollment crisis to instead focus on our priorities and values provided us with the opportunity to lead toward emancipatory education. We were able to reframe the challenge from a deficit-focused concern (do we close a failing program or invest resources to try to save it?) into an equity-driven opportunity: reimagining our educational leadership programs into an ideal that positions us to be leaders in preparing future school leaders committed to equity, inclusion, and racial justice. In their chapter on making decisions for equity in higher education, Posselt, Hernandez, and Villarreal write, "Too often equity is as incompatible with, secondary to, or inherently divergent from efficiency or excellence. A simple reframing and return to the details of the situation can facilitate a more holistic and inclusive view of the decision at hand" (2020, p. 47). By stepping back from the enrollment crisis and focusing instead on values and priorities, our faculty were able to design a program that is grounded in an emancipatory frame. Faculty were able to name and claim the work of emancipation as central to effective school leadership. By doing so, the department has been revitalized and the faculty re-energized. One of our tenure track faculty members, Dr. Rebeca Burciaga, who had previously been marginalized to the point of exploring options to leave the department, saw herself and her research on the educational experiences of Chicana and Latina families foregrounded in the new emancipatory vision for the program and recommitted to the department as chair. Her leadership has been central to the successful launch of the program and the growing future of the department.

Reframing this challenge and leaning into an equity focus was not without doubters. Certainly, there were questions raised as the new program proposal worked its way through the approval process about the activist orientation of the curriculum and the strong language used to frame the program. Would the term "emancipatory" in the program's title dissuade prospective students? Would the emphasis on interrogating the existing inequities in school systems and teaching emerging leaders to push for transformative change turn off our regional school district partners? Although these concerns are not surprising, what we have found is exactly the opposite. The strong emancipatory stance of the program has attracted significant attention from prospective students, regional educational leaders, and national professional associations (Burciaga & Lattimer, 2020). The transformative language that we intentionally chose to use in the program's title and description has energized and shaped the program, signaling to both internal and external constituents our priorities and our intent. Linguist James Gee reminds us that language is never neutral and that through language "social goals are created, sustained, and distributed" (1999, p.2).

## ***Building a Framework for Transformation in Higher Education***

By naming and claiming emancipatory language in the program's title and description, our faculty are setting a vision for students and future partners and holding themselves accountable to breathe life into that vision across all aspects of the curriculum and program design.

The successful reimagining of our school leadership program has had carryover effects within the educational leadership department and across the college. Within the department, faculty have been energized to expand into other dimensions of educational leadership including a master's degree for higher education leadership and a transformative leadership minor that similarly lean into an interdisciplinary approach to leadership development through engagement with emancipatory pedagogies and practices. We've encouraged this work by providing financial resources to support program design and curricular work, approvals for hiring new faculty, and political support to navigate through the bureaucratic hurdles at the university and system levels. Across the college, other departments have taken note of the explicit and implicit support provided to educational leadership for these programs and have honed and tailored some of their efforts accordingly. Curriculum changes, hiring requests, program proposals, and funding requests from across the college have increasingly reflected the emancipatory framing that has proven successful for the educational leadership department. Although these changes likely reflect multiple influences, including our strategic planning work which emphasizes similar priorities, the existence of a proof point in the emancipatory school leadership program cannot be discounted as a factor to encourage other departments to take risks when considering changes they too may want to make. Museus and LePeau (2020) describe this approach to transformative leadership as "subversive" in that it provides rewards for positive change and socializes ideas and approaches at the local level. Although creating subversive change was not top-of-mind when I initially learned of the enrollment challenges that the educational leadership department had been facing, the opportunity to reframe a crisis into an opportunity to advance emancipatory education has proven to be critical to creating transformative change across the college.

### **Leading by Following: Modeling Racial Justice Practices**

Marcos: Our transformative work in the college has included challenging program revision projects as well as so many smaller scale and informal projects. In November of 2020, we were fortunate to host Bettina Love in a series of talks with our campus and community. We had centered Love's work for over a year in our college, using her powerful book, "We Want to do More than Survive" (2019) as a centerpiece in our development and implementation of a new strategic plan with a focus on emancipatory education that includes an emphasis on culturally sustaining approaches to student, family and community engagement.

As we thought about how to engage Love in a way that would be meaningful and challenging to our community, we wanted to ensure that Love's work felt connected to our own challenges and realities as a college of education. Often, when scholars who challenge our institutions in profound ways come to give talks, those on the campus can appreciate their work but feel like it is intended for and directed at others. We needed Love's insights to be understood as directed at us and our daily work. We needed to see ourselves both in her critique and in her directives for abolitionist educational work. We needed to be called in to this work in ways that felt necessary and possible.

We asked Dr. Love to participate in three talks/conversations with our community. The first was a session for BIPOC high school and university students to consider pursuing degrees, credentials and careers working in schools and alongside communities seeking emancipatory approaches to schooling. Rather than create an opportunity for "VIPs" to rub shoulders with a nationally acclaimed scholar, we

### ***Building a Framework for Transformation in Higher Education***

wanted an opportunity for students who are rarely at the center of our university to be in conversation with Love, because they deserved to be there and we needed them to be there. Love gave a short presentation for the students and then answered their questions about what it meant to engage in abolitionist work and the challenges of taking on this work for BIPOC folks. We also asked one of our local high school Ethnic Studies teachers to share her understanding of Love's work and what it meant in her own practice to create emancipatory opportunities for her students. Through this conversation we were building community by creating a space for students who had been historically underserved by our schools and colleges to understand that they were a reflection of one of the preeminent scholars in the country and that they mattered, in profound ways, to our goals as a college and university. One student asked, "How do we handle and deal with teachers, professors, instructors, [and others] who do not respect/recognize the humanity of their non-white students?" Love was moved by the question and made sure the students understood that their humanity was, in fact, essential to the future of emancipatory education in our country. The session helped us see what it looks like when students and community members are at the center of our work and when we allow them to lead us where they know we need to go.

The second session with Love was the all-campus event. This is often the time when a campus will center campus "leaders" and put the guest in conversation with those in the highest positions in the university. Instead, we asked members of our community to facilitate the discussion that followed Love's main talk to the campus community. Two of the facilitators were students in the college who had been leaders in the new Emancipatory Education Now project that the college developed. They had engaged in a series of podcasts that explored transformative education in the college and in their lives to help the college community begin to fully inhabit the objectives of our strategic plan (which centers emancipatory education). The third facilitator was an Assistant Professor in Special Education and someone who was deeply committed to confronting the challenge of replacing the deficit approaches that dominate special education and the schooling of students of Color. During the session with Bettina Love, each of these facilitators shared their own experiences and expertise and then posed a question related to an issue that our college needed to understand and confront. They engaged Love with compassion and commitment and brought the issues that she raises in her work directly in conversation with our reality. They challenged us and forced us to sit with that challenge without re-centering those who are almost always at the center. Our campus community was deeply engaged by the presentation of Dr. Love and the conversation that took place with our facilitators. We got feedback that, despite the fact that the session was conducted via Zoom, it was the most engaging, relevant, and helpful public forum that they had participated in. Racial justice praxis is not about saying that we want racial justice. It requires that we embody that praxis, centering BIPOC community members, recognizing the power of their insights, creating space for them to share these insights in ways that reflect the ways of being and knowing in their communities, listening intently, and both learning and applying the lessons from that learning in direct ways.

Our last session with Love was for local school leaders who worked in K12 and community college contexts. We asked our partners to come to this space with a willingness to center Love, a Black, queer, woman, as one of the foremost experts on emancipatory schooling in the country, and as someone who needs to be at the center of their learning if they are to rise to the new expectations being made for them related to anti-racist practice. This was a challenging approach because it meant senior administrators at our university and at local community colleges and school districts were de-centered. They were in an intimate gathering that was personal and pointed and in which they were implicated in the institutionalized racism that dominates schooling in this country. They were also acknowledged for the powerful role

## ***Building a Framework for Transformation in Higher Education***

they can play in anti-racist practice, but this acknowledgment came with a challenge for them personally and professionally.

Through these events we sought to model racial justice practice for our community. Love demanded that we look at ourselves in ways that were challenging and necessary, while our facilitators and students demonstrated themselves to be true leaders in this work. Who they are as members of the college community matters, and their leadership modeled the fact that those who have historically been at the margins of the work of the university need to be at the center. When they are at the center, we all learn both what we must do and how to do it if we are to embody emancipatory education in meaningful ways. This was a one-time series of gatherings, but as a cornerstone event it reflected the way in which our leadership always strives to model racial justice, a critical component to emancipatory education. Rather than telling our college community the importance of decentering whiteness in our anti-racist work, we demonstrated how to engage in that decentering, what it offered our community, and that it was possible, necessary and affirming for all of us.

## **Budgeting Our Values: Re-Thinking Funding Priorities and Processes**

Heather: One of the most direct and powerful levers that higher education leaders have to create transformative change is budgeting. Although few of us studied anything about finance in our doctoral programs, understanding how budgets have been used to maintain the status quo and how they can support or limit change is essential if we aspire to transform our institutions to engage in emancipatory education (Education Deans for Justice and Equity, 2019). Thanks to a healthy endowment, strong enrollments, and a previous administration who had been frugal in maintaining reserves, there was no immediate budget crisis when we arrived in the college. The vast majority of the annual budget was tied up in fixed personnel costs. Many of the mechanisms for giving scholarships and research funding were well established and ran largely without the need for much oversight. We could have easily continued for years without really interrogating the finances of the college. But several small questions and events in our first year in the college led to larger questions and opportunities to realign key aspects of the budget to support the college's emancipatory education work.

One early question came up when I was asked to sign off on scholarship award recipients in October. Why, I wondered, were we awarding scholarships midway through the fall semester? Our new graduate and undergraduate students committed to attending months earlier. They already had to make plans for budgets, loans, jobs, and course loads well in advance of starting the semester in August. I had no doubt that receiving a financial award in October would be greatly appreciated, but in many ways, it seemed that it would be too late to help students with their financial planning for the academic year and it was certainly too late to help with student recruitment. More questions followed: How much were the scholarship awards for? How did students apply for awards? How were awards decided? Did the awards significantly impact the opportunities that students had while in the college and set them up for success after graduation?

After gathering input from students, student advisors, faculty and staff, we made changes, shifting the timeline for scholarship applications and awards to the spring to align with our program application and acceptance timelines and combining individual awards so that students received a minimum of \$1000. These changes were particularly important for our graduate programs. Many of our students are first generation college-going and the prospect of taking out loans to attend graduate school, particularly when considering education-related fields that often have salary ceilings, dissuaded many from

pursuing post-baccalaureate credentials and degrees. This has a direct impact on the lack of diversity in our educator workforce across our state (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Being able to apply for and receive scholarship funding before committing to attend a post-baccalaureate program made a huge difference for students to feel financially confident in their pursuit of graduate study.

The response to these relatively minor initial changes was very positive from both students and donors. We saw an increase in funding applications, stronger matriculation numbers tied to scholarship funding, and an increase in donations to support student scholarships. The following year, we went a step further, creating the Impact San José Fellowship program that provides scholarship dollars equivalent to approximately the cost of one year of tuition at SJSU, along with mentorship and support for future teachers who are committed to making a positive impact in schools in the greater San José region (<https://www.sjsu.edu/education/academics/teach/fellows>). The fellowship has supported and advanced the recruitment and enrollment of educator candidates from diverse backgrounds who are committed to emancipatory education in our regional schools.

Similar opportunities for realignment came when considering how to distribute research funding for both students and faculty, program and department budgets, professional development funds for faculty and staff, and, following the adoption of our college strategic plan, funding to support strategic plan-related initiatives proposed by faculty, staff, and students. In each of these instances, we considered our emancipatory goals as we considered how the funding is structured, who gets access, the processes by which funding is distributed, and the implicit and explicit impact on constituents throughout our community.

As we've worked to realign budgets to prioritize emancipatory education, we have tried to be as transparent as possible. In addition to gathering input from multiple constituents before making changes, we've communicated the rationale behind changes, and set up inclusive structures and processes to support the distribution of funds. Clear funding application processes, decision criteria, and regular distribution timelines are announced. Committees are organized that include tenured and tenure track faculty and, where appropriate, students, staff, and lecturers to make recommendations on funding decisions. Transparency and inclusion in decision making strengthen the sense of community buy in, give legitimacy to funding decisions, minimize concerns about favoritism, and hold us accountable for following through on our commitments to emancipatory education. In addition, by opening the process up and including multiple stakeholders in decision making, we are modeling and socializing emancipatory approaches to all of our work in the college. This socialization can, in turn, have an impact on the organizational culture as a whole and policies and practices in programs and departments across the college. For example, faculty and staff who were engaged in interviewing and selecting our Impact San José Fellows, took insights from the process back to their departments and used them to inform conversations about how to restructure admissions procedures to strengthen their emancipatory focus. This is another example of a "subversive" approach to socialization (Museus & LePeau, 2020), providing models, support, and permission for our colleagues within the college to make changes focused on emancipatory education.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although we have taken significant steps over the past three years to create a path of emancipatory education in our college, there is, of course, much work still to be done. We need to actively interrogate the rules and processes around tenure and promotion to recognize and push back against the hidden (and not-so-hidden) biases facing women and faculty of color. We need to continue to work to diversify

## ***Building a Framework for Transformation in Higher Education***

our faculty, staff, and leadership teams. We need to strengthen the sense of belonging, community, and agency for our students who have been marginalized within the university and our larger society. We need to work to remove barriers, build programs and partnerships, and strengthen outreach so that access to a university education at SJSU becomes a realistic and fully-supported option, not a privilege, for all in our community.

As we move forward with these transformation efforts, we will build on the successes we have had thus far, recognizing not just what has been achieved, but the values and understandings that have shaped our work. Looking back on the examples outlined in this chapter, three consistencies in particular stand out as having been essential to our efforts and contributing to our emancipatory education work.

First, has been the importance of consistently and intentionally committing to an emancipatory agenda, mapping out what that entails, and holding ourselves to that objective as a community. This seems obvious, but is never easy. The greatest pressures, the most expedient actions, and the loudest voices are not always the ones that are pushing us toward transformative decision making. Our own positionalities, both based on our individual backgrounds and experiences and on the leadership roles we now hold, requires that we thoughtfully and intentionally navigate our relationships and decision making and check ourselves for biases that may work against the equity goals to which we aspire. Consistently revisiting the priorities of the college, considering the implications of individual actions in the context of our broader goals, engaging in professional and personal growth that raises our own consciousness and understanding, being willing to recognize mis-steps and reconsider actions, and constantly checking in with one another has been critical to ensuring that we maintain our focus on emancipatory education across big and small decisions in our work.

Second, has been the importance of building relationships and making a conscious and consistent effort to listen and, in particular, to listen to the perspectives, experiences, and expertise of those who have been marginalized by the implicit and explicit ideologies, policies and practices that have maintained the status quo in higher education for generations. When asking questions about existing policies and practices, considering new programs and initiatives, or exploring ways to address challenges, learning from the wisdom of the community has been an essential part of making decisions that are grounded in an emancipatory framework. Bess and Dee (2008) argue that a post-modern approach to leadership demands that administrators question: “who participates in the planning process; how different voices can inform strategy development; and whose interpretation of the environment guides decision making” (as cited in Martinez & Cooper, 2020). Being continually conscious of who has historically been centered and who has been marginalized in both explicit and hidden ways as we seek community input on our efforts requires that we actively seek out the wisdom of:

- Students - particularly BIPOC and other students who have been marginalized in specific ways at each stage in their programs, as well as those who have not sought admission into our programs because it did not feel like a space that would acknowledge and address their needs,
- Faculty - including part-time faculty, not-yet-tenured faculty, and BIPOC faculty who are too often marginalized in decision making, overburdened with service and meeting the needs of students that others do not, and who can have their contributions and expertise undervalued,
- Staff - who are often closest to understanding existing policy and practice barriers to equity, but whose knowledge is often overlooked, and,
- Community partners - who have a keen awareness of how the university succeeds and fails to build equity and opportunity in our region, but whose insights are often simply ignored.

Seeking out these voices is not always easy; it requires building trust and taking time to intentionally and consistently include community in the decision-making process, but it is essential if decisions are to be grounded in an emancipatory stance, result in substantive change and have durability.

A final consistency in supporting transformative leadership has been the importance of being willing to step back and reflect. As leaders, we are often pressured to make immediate decisions, and while there are times when quick decisions are needed, deliberation ensures wise, thoughtful, and emancipatory-centered actions. In her work on mindfulness, Lazar (2005) emphasizes the need to slow down the thought process and engage in reflection as a tenet of effective leadership practice. In addition to providing time to seek out the voices of others, slowing down decision making allows for deliberation: listening and really hearing what others are saying, considering their positionality and our own, exploring alternatives and their consequences, and reflecting on our emancipatory values and goals. It allows us to reframe challenges, resist the constraints of binary choices, and seek out innovations that emerge from what had previously been considered the margins but now are at the center of our leadership practice. In addition, when we slow down and deliberate and are transparent about the factors we are weighing—our questions, considerations, and concerns—it allows others to similarly reflect, to recognize the complexity of the challenge, appreciate the perspectives of others, and, even if a decision does not ultimately proceed as they might ideally want, accept that it was thoughtfully and intentionally made.

Taken together, these practices have enabled us to make decisions that are grounded in an emancipatory framework and begin to create a culture in the college of transformative engagement. It is always a challenge to step back and assess the change work described in this chapter. We can be overly self-critical given the high aspirations we have for our work, but one measure that has been important is that we have heard from colleagues in and out of the college that many of the most important and most marginalized members of our community now feel seen, heard and finally able to actively pursue their previously silenced emancipatory goals. Still, many challenges lie ahead. As we face a post-COVID reality, there will be increasing pressures related to the impact of the pandemic on enrollments, budgets, hiring, and modes of instruction. These pressures will exacerbate the disequilibrium that we have seen emerge for some in the college, as the culture has shifted and the status and privilege that they once held has been challenged. At this moment, it is even more critical that we hold ourselves accountable as leaders for emancipatory education across all of our actions and decisions with our college community.

## REFERENCES

Bess, J. L., & Dee, J. R. (2008). *Understanding college and university organization theories for effective policy and practice*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Burciaga, R., & Lattimer, H. (2020). Innovative programs: Emancipatory school leadership San José State University educational leadership MA program. *UCEA Review*, 61(3), 10–11.

Carver-Thomas, D. (2018). *Diversifying the teaching profession: How to recruit and retain teachers of color*. Learning Policy Institute.

Education Deans for Justice and Equity. (2019, June 20). *Education Colleges for Justice & Equity: A Framework for Assessment and Transformation* (“*The EDJE Framework*”). DOI:[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AVVkmzPxEMAt\\_g-BPYyNVHgseyImREnN/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AVVkmzPxEMAt_g-BPYyNVHgseyImREnN/view)

## ***Building a Framework for Transformation in Higher Education***

Gee, J. P. (1999). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and practice*. Routledge.

Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an anti-racist*. One World.

Kezar, A. (Ed.). (2010). *Recognizing and serving low-income students in higher education: An examination of institutional policies, practices, and culture*. Routledge. doi:10.4324/9780203851258

Kezar, A., & Posselt, J. (Eds.). (2020). *Higher education administration for social justice and equity: Critical perspectives for leadership*. Routledge.

Kilgo, C. A., Ezell Sheets, J. K., & Pascarella, E. T. (2005). The link between high-impact practices and student learning: Some longitudinal evidence. *Higher Education*, 69(4), 509–525. doi:10.1007/10734-014-9788-z

Kohli, R., & Pizarro, M. (2015). Fighting to educate our own: Teachers of color, relational accountability, and the struggle for racial justice. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 49(1), 72–84. doi:10.1080/10665684.2015.1121457

Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding Achievement in U.S. Schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3–12. doi:10.3102/0013189X035007003

Lazar, S.W. (2005). Mindfulness research. *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy*, 220-238.

Locks, A. M., & Gregerman, S. R. (2008). Undergraduate research as an institutional retention strategy: The university of Michigan model. In R. L. Blanton (Ed.), *Creating effective undergraduate research programs in science* (pp. 11–32). Teachers College Press.

Love, B. (2019). *We want to do more than survive: Abolitionist teaching and the pursuit of educational freedom*. Beacon Press.

Martinez, M., & Cooper, D. (2020). Words matter: Social justice and policy discourses in higher education. In A. Kezar & J. Posselt (Eds.), *Higher education administration for social justice and equity: Critical perspectives for leadership* (pp. 238–250). Routledge.

Museus, S. D., & LePeau, L. A. (2020). Navigating neoliberal organizational cultures: Implications for higher education leaders advancing social justice agendas. In A. Kezar & J. Posselt (Eds.), *Higher education administration for social justice and equity: Critical perspectives for leadership* (pp. 209–224). Routledge.

Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (2011). The wise leader. *Harvard Business Review*, 89(5), 58–67. PMID:21548419

Paris, D., & Alim, H. S. (2017). *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and learning for justice in a changing world*. Teachers College Press.

Posselt, J., Hernandez, T., & Villareal, C. D. (2020). Choose wisely: Making decisions with and for equity in higher education. In A. Kezar & J. Posselt (Eds.), *Higher education administration for social justice and equity: Critical perspectives for leadership* (pp. 43–66). Routledge.

Ribera, A. K., Miller, A. L., & Dumford, A. D. (2017). Sense of peer belonging and institutional acceptance in the first year: The role of high-impact practices. *Journal of College Student Development*, 58(4), 545–563. doi:10.1353/csd.2017.0042

Schein, E. H. (2010). *Organizational culture and leadership* (Vol. 2). John Wiley & Sons.

Sternberg, R. J. (Ed.). (1990). *Wisdom: Its nature, origins, and development*. Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139173704

Wilder, C. S. (2013). *Ebony & ivory: Race, slavery, and the troubled history of America's universities*. Bloomsbury Press.

Yosso, T. J. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 8(1), 69–91. doi:10.1080/1361332052000341006

## ENDNOTES

\* This is further complicated by the fact that BIPOC community members had multiple needs that reflected their diverse experiences and needs.

<sup>1</sup> In this article we use the terms BIPOC and people of Color. People of Color has been used for a number of years and is established as a term that references non-white people in the United States and acknowledges the ways that white supremacy and racism have related impacts on people from these distinct communities. BIPOC, which stands for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, has recently become more commonly used to emphasize the fact that the experiences of Black and Indigenous people in the U.S. are distinct and that we need to acknowledge the impact of slavery and conquest and colonization on these communities.

<sup>2</sup> I reference the concepts of *cariño* and *confianza* in the ways in which I have learned, understood and applied them in my life. Forthcoming writing (in conversation with the literature) will create a conceptual framework for how these approaches can be integrated into supporting Chicanx and Latinx students, staff and faculty in higher education.