

Guided Pathways

Findings from the **Ensuring Students Are Learning Project**



Key Takeaways and Recommendations to Strengthen Guided Pathways

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Introduction

As part of the Strengthening Guided Pathways and Career Success by Ensuring Students Are Learning project led by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), twenty campuses¹ engaged in several research activities to study the effects of the guided pathways framework on teaching and learning outcomes. The Center for Community College Student Engagement (CCCSE) partnered with AAC&U as an external evaluator for these efforts. This summary report outlines aggregated key takeaways from three data sources. The first source consists of pre-project implementation structured interviews conducted in fall 2019 with randomly selected team members from ten of the twenty participating institutions. The second source consists of post-project implementation structured interviews conducted in spring 2021 with all twenty participating institutions (both sets of interviews were facilitated by CCCSE staff, and two reports on the findings along with transcripts were submitted to AAC&U). The third source consists of responses from a project survey AAC&U and Hanover Research administered online to all twenty participating campuses in April and May 2021.² In this multiyear project, campus teams collaborated with AAC&U and CCCSE to identify faculty teams within designated pathways at their institutions to implement the refreshed components for the ensuring students are learning pillar of the guided pathways framework that was revised and adopted by the Pathways Collaborative, (see box on right).³

For this project, the research questions centered on campus team perceptions of professional development, course design, assessment, equity and equity-mindedness, student engagement, and HIPs.

Professional Development

During the pre-project implementation interviews, the campus teams stated that most of the institutions had a center for teaching and learning or something comparable. Participation in professional development varies across institutions because at some institutions it is mandatory, and at others it is voluntary. Few institutions provide incentives for full-time faculty participation, but at some, performance evaluation committees take engagement in professional development opportunities

into consideration for increases in merit pay. Most incentives, if offered, are provided to encourage adjunct faculty participation. The respondents acknowledged the time challenges for adjunct faculty engagement with professional development. Similar to findings in CCCSE's 2020 report *Building Momentum: Using Guided Pathways to Redesign the Student Experience*, most of the respondents stated that the current professional development offerings did not specifically focus on the guided pathways framework.

Throughout the project, AAC&U provided a series of professional development opportunities to support the implementation of the ensuring students are learning components. Those opportunities included project meetings, webinars conducted by AAC&U project staff and Pathways Collaborative partners, and curated resources to expand practitioner knowledge on key topics and promising strategies for improving student learning and outcomes. In the post-project implementation interviews, the campus teams acknowledged the effect of having targeted professional development opportunities tied to guided pathways implementation. In particular, the institutions referenced AAC&U's Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) Institute⁴ and the benefit of faculty being trained as scorers of student artifacts to build institutional capacity for direct assessment of student

The Ensuring Students Are Learning Pillar of the Guided Pathways Framework

Use program-level outcomes, culturally responsive teaching practices, and high-quality assessment to promote student learning inside and outside the classroom.

Use these practices to enrich and assess student learning:

- Scaled high-quality, program-relevant applied learning experiences
- Intentional and sustained student engagement
- Evidence-based, high-impact teaching practices (HIPs) across modalities
- Institution-wide commitment to equity-minded, asset-based teaching improvement
- Quality assessment of program learning outcomes that lead to credentials, further education, and/or gainful employment

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learning outcomes. The participants also mentioned AAC&U's Institute on High-Impact Practices and Student Success as instrumental in expanding their knowledge on equity and student engagement with HIPs. They also referenced the value of having a list of curated resources⁵ and specifically referenced the Transparency in Learning and Teaching project,⁶ CCCSE's Ensure Students Are Learning web tool kit and playbook,⁷ the scale of adoption self-assessment from the Community College Research Center,⁸ the Guided Pathways Resource Center's tools,⁹ and the *Advancing Equity through Guided Pathways Series* discussion guides created by the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement.¹⁰ Some of the interviewees noted that they were not as familiar with the resources. They recommended making targeted resources for guided pathways implementation an unavoidable professional development experience with clear identification of the resources on centers for teaching and learning webpages. Several of the campus teams noted that they subsequently redesigned their professional development offerings and resources in this way. The interviewees also noted that, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, most professional development opportunities had transitioned to online workshops, increasing access for adjunct faculty.

In the results from the 2021 project survey administered by AAC&U and Hanover Research, more than two-thirds of the respondents reported that the project helped to inform the design of professional development opportunities. Nearly 60 percent of the respondents indicated that they plan to implement what they learned from the VALUE Institute into future professional development offerings (see figure 1, page 7).

While campus teams acknowledged the importance of targeted professional development efforts and their identified improvements, the survey results showed that professional development related to equity-mindedness—in particular race-conscious teaching and learning practices—and teaching across modalities need to be elevated as key focus areas (see figure 2, page 7).

Recommendations

- Redesign professional development offerings to be intentionally connected to efforts to implement guided pathways.
- Identify institutional capacity needs, especially related to equity-mindedness, and clearly state how professional development opportunities are tied to specific goals for guided pathways implementation efforts.
- Publish targeted resources in a structured way to encourage use.
- Continue to offer online professional development opportunities to increase access and participation.

Course Design

When describing their course design processes during the pre-project implementation interviews, respondents indicated that they collaborate with faculty within their departments and/or programs and tend to use a backward-design approach by focusing on the intended outcomes and designed assignments based on those course goals. Some faculty indicated that they design their own courses without collaborating with others.

The guided pathways model promotes curricular coherence across courses within designated pathways to advance student learning and engagement. With this goal in mind, the professional development resources shared with the participating campuses and the project activities encouraged collaboration across programs, departments, and disciplines. As a result of these project goals, the respondents to the post-project implementation interviews regularly used these terms: *scaffolding*, *transparency*, and *low-stakes assessment*, as outlined in the interview findings report from CCCSE:

Scaffolding focuses on how the students will learn the material—the intentional, integrated, and engaged approaches to teaching and learning. Transparency is being deliberate and strategic in communicating with students about the purpose of the course assignments. Finally, low-stakes assessment was described as moving away from the traditional two types of course assessments (midterm and final exams) to include additional assessments throughout the term of the course. The goal is to help strengthen student retention and understanding of course content while providing a supportive learning environment that removes some of the anxiety and intensive, undue pressure on students.

In addition to expanding their use of strategies to improve course design, the respondents said a major outcome of the project is the interdisciplinary collaboration among faculty. Faculty said that the project provided a foundation to address the organizational silos that had existed between academic departments. They are now working to cocreate assignments across departments within pathways.

In the project survey, 60 percent of the respondents reported that they often collaborate with colleagues on assignments, and 80 percent responded that they utilize transparent assignment design. However, there is progress to be made on integrating aspects of culturally responsive teaching within course design (see figure 3, page 8).

Recommendations

- Promote cross-disciplinary collaboration in course design efforts and professional development opportunities to embody the vision of the guided pathways model.
- Expand targeted professional development opportunities to prepare faculty to engage in more culturally responsive pedagogy, specifically focusing on learning within the

context of students' cultures and communities and selecting materials that reflect the diversity of the students and their lived experiences.

Assessment

In the initial interviews, participating faculty described the various ways they assess students for their courses (e.g., mid-term exams, final exams, course projects, writing assignments, e-portfolios, and student self-reflections). Few participants discussed assessment of student learning across pathways. But by the post-project implementation, that had changed. After participating in AAC&U's VALUE Institute¹¹ and engaging in activities to build institutional capacity for direct assessment of student learning that included strategies for scorer training and data collection, faculty interviewees made the following comments:

We're not assessing for the purpose of grading. . . my personal takeaway is to look at [student] work with two sets of eyes: one being through the eyes of grading and one being through the eyes of competency.

I wouldn't have even thought about doing the work with rubrics if I hadn't [participated in] the VALUE Institute.

We are learning from each other in different disciplines about how to improve student outcomes—it's really powerful.

The project survey results also support these observations on the importance of direct assessment of learning within guided pathways, with 96 percent of respondents stating that they are likely to use the VALUE Institute practices and methodologies in future assessment efforts (see figure 4, page 8).

Recommendations

- Be intentional when building institutional capacity for direct assessment of student learning.
- Align assessment processes with the institutional goals for student learning, equity, and engagement. This alignment should be transparent and widely understood.

Equity and Equity-Mindedness

When the project started, some of the participants intermingled the definitions of *equity*, *equality*, *diversity*, *inclusion*, and *equity-mindedness*, a common habit among educators and practitioners. The equity examples they referenced in the initial interviews centered on working with students with different learning styles and on facilitating class participation to encourage diverse viewpoints. The participants also discussed socioeconomic status as an equity issue.

The refreshed components of the ensuring students are learning pillar specifically reference an "institution-wide commitment to equity-minded, asset-based teaching

improvement." Equity-mindedness "refers to the perspective or mode of thinking exhibited by practitioners who call attention to patterns of inequity in student outcomes. These practitioners are willing to take personal and institutional responsibility for the success of their students, and critically reassess their own practices. It also requires that practitioners are race-conscious and aware of the social and historical context of exclusionary practices in American Higher Education," according to the University of Southern California's Center for Urban Education. In other words, the goal is to move beyond just noticing equity gaps in educational outcomes and to understand, for example, the impact of historical, social, cultural, and political constructs that hinder student success, as well as to recognize educators' roles in this process.

In the post-project implementation interviews, the campus teams showed an expanded understanding of terminology and equity goals. Some noted that their institutions had invested resources in hiring new positions to examine and lead equity efforts. As one interviewee stated, "We are now having conversations that we haven't had before." The institutions' growth was illustrated in AAC&U's July 2021 article "Equity Is Behind All of This': How Community Colleges Are Strengthening Guided Pathways and Ensuring Students Are Learning." As noted in the article, the campuses are on a journey and committed to the additional work needed to become equity-conscious practitioners.

The project survey results also support these observations with 86 percent of respondents reporting the utilization of disaggregated data to inform decision making. Respondents also indicated higher levels of understanding of terminology, but there are still opportunities for growth and enhanced work on equity-mindedness (see figure 5, page 9, and figure 6, below).

Figure 6. Equity-Mindedness Defined

Q15. How has your definition of equity-mindedness changed, if at all, since the beginning of the Ensuring Students are Learning project? *Major themes.* (n=21)

Participants' definition **remains unchanged**, but they acknowledge that the **conversation has evolved**
(33%)

Participants have incorporated or plan to **incorporate 'equity-mindedness' into their practices**
(e.g., teaching, student support, instructional design)
(33%)

Participants' **definition has expanded**, and/or participants see the differences between **'equality' versus 'equity'**
(24%)

Recommendations

- Be clear in terminology, a necessary first step in examining diversity and equity efforts within guided pathways.
- As an institution, focus on building the people capacity to examine equity that goes beyond identifying equity gaps. Intentionally design professional development opportunities with this goal in mind.
- Being an equity-minded practitioner does not happen within a short time span. Embed the concept and practices related to how this is defined (i.e., being race-conscious) within all aspects of the guided pathways framework.

Student Engagement and HIPs

In the pre-project implementation interviews, faculty discussed how they promoted student engagement through the implementation of active and applied learning experiences and the associated challenges with designing these learning experiences. Faculty teaching in applied learning programs expressed that these learning experiences are deeply embedded in their courses. Other faculty members discussed collaborative group work and interdisciplinary collaboration through common reads. Some wanted to expand their use of active and applied learning experiences and hoped that they would learn more as a result of their project participation. Few of the campus team members participating in the initial interviews referenced active and applied learning experiences as HIPs.

During the post-project implementation interviews, the faculty provided a plethora of HIPs as examples of active and applied learning experiences implemented across modalities. They discussed the importance of incorporating students' lived experiences into the design of HIPs. Interviewees also noted the increase in attendance at professional development opportunities focused on HIPs.

The project survey results indicated that respondents are intentionally embedding HIPs within their pathways (see figure 7, page 9), incorporating the quality elements into the design of HIPs (see figure 8, page 10), integrating equity into HIPs (see figure 9, page 10), making improvements to address equitable access to HIPs (see figure 10, page 11), and making progress to address equity gaps in participation within HIPs, but there is still room for improvement (see figure 11, page 11).

Recommendations

- Student engagement with HIPs continues to be a valued learning experience across pathways. To intentionally embed these experiences within and across courses, plan for higher levels of preparation and professional development.
- Equity in access and participation remain concerns. Engage in deeper inquiry and targeted efforts to continue improvements.

Conclusion

The research findings generated from the project with the twenty community colleges support efforts for intentionally designed professional development opportunities related to guided pathways implementation. The findings also support the value of cross-department/program/discipline course design to advance curricular coherence across pathways, the importance of building institutional capacity for direct assessment of student learning outcomes, the necessity of clarity in equity terminology to achieve equity goals and in becoming equity-conscious practitioners, and the expansive use of HIPs to promote student engagement and to address equity in student outcomes.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Amarillo College, Chattanooga State Community College, Community College of Baltimore County, CofC Hills College, Finger Lakes Community College, Houston Community College, Indian River State College, Kapi'olani Community College, Kilgore College, Miami Dade College, Middlesex Community College, Monroe Community College, Northeast Wisconsin Technical College, Palo Alto College, Salt Lake Community College, San Antonio College, San Jacinto College, South Texas College, St. Petersburg College, Waubesa Community College.
- 2 Some campuses had more than one team member complete the survey.
- 3 The Pathways Collaborative is a group of organizations committed to improving rates of college completion, transfer, and attainment of jobs with value in the labor market—and achieving equity in those outcomes. These organizations collaborated on the development of the guided pathways model. Individually and collectively, these organizations now support guided pathways reform at hundreds of community colleges—and at the state level—across the country (<https://www.pathwaysresources.org/pathways-collaborative/>).
- 4 As of January 2022, the VALUE Institute will be rebranded as the VALUE Scoring Collaborative. See <https://www.aacu.org/value> for more information.
- 5 The resources shared with the institutions are included in AAC&U's Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Framework.
- 6 The Transparency in Learning and Teaching project aims to advance equitable teaching and learning practices that reduce systemic inequities in higher education (<https://tilthighered.com>).
- 7 <https://cccse.org/ESAL>
- 8 <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/presentation/guided-pathways-scale-adoption-assessment-workshop-2.html>
- 9 <https://www.pathwaysresources.org>
- 10 <https://ncii-improve.com/advancing-equity-through-pathways/>
- 11 The VALUE Institute enables any higher education institution, department, program, state, consortium, or provider to utilize the VALUE rubrics approach to assessment by collecting and uploading samples of student work to a digital repository to have the work scored by certified VALUE Institute faculty and other educator scorers for external validation of institutional learning assessment.

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Appendix: Figures 1–5 and 7–10

Figure 1. Professional Development

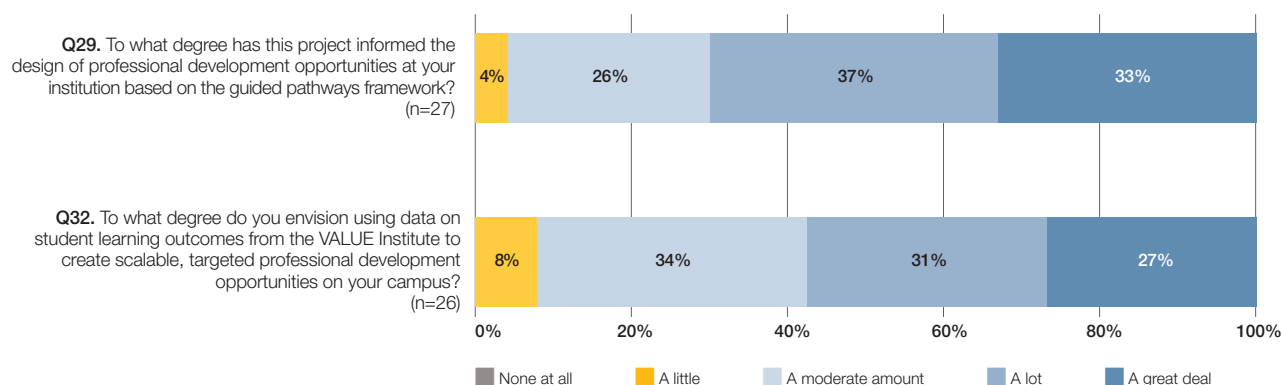


Figure 2. Professional Development Focus Areas

Q30. What has been the primary focus of these professional development opportunities? *Select all that apply.* (n=28)
 Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 because respondents could select multiple options.

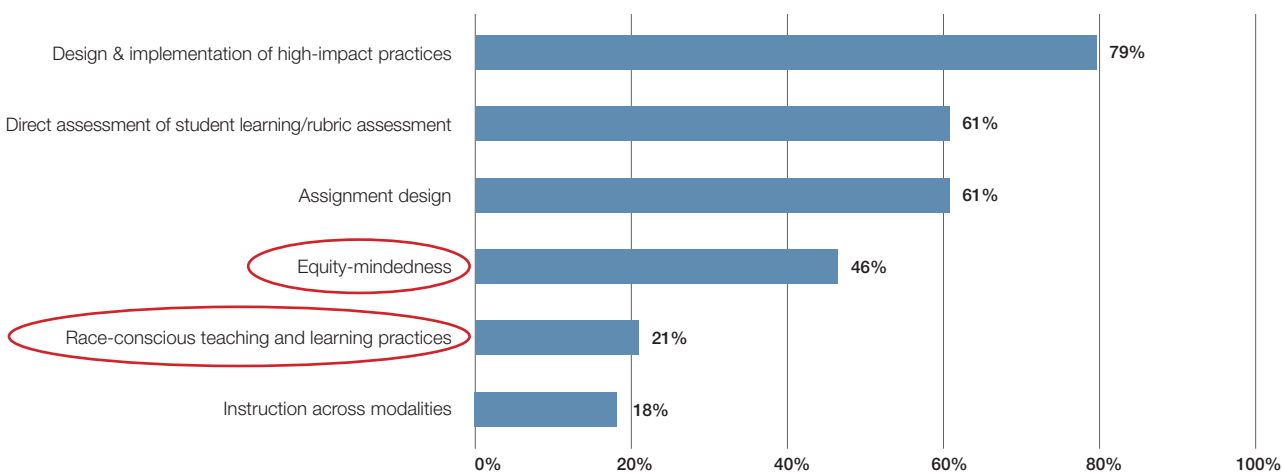


Figure 3. Culturally Responsive Teaching

Q10. Please select which of the following components of culturally responsive teaching were implemented in course design to some degree. *Select all that apply.* (n=35)
Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 because respondents could select multiple options.

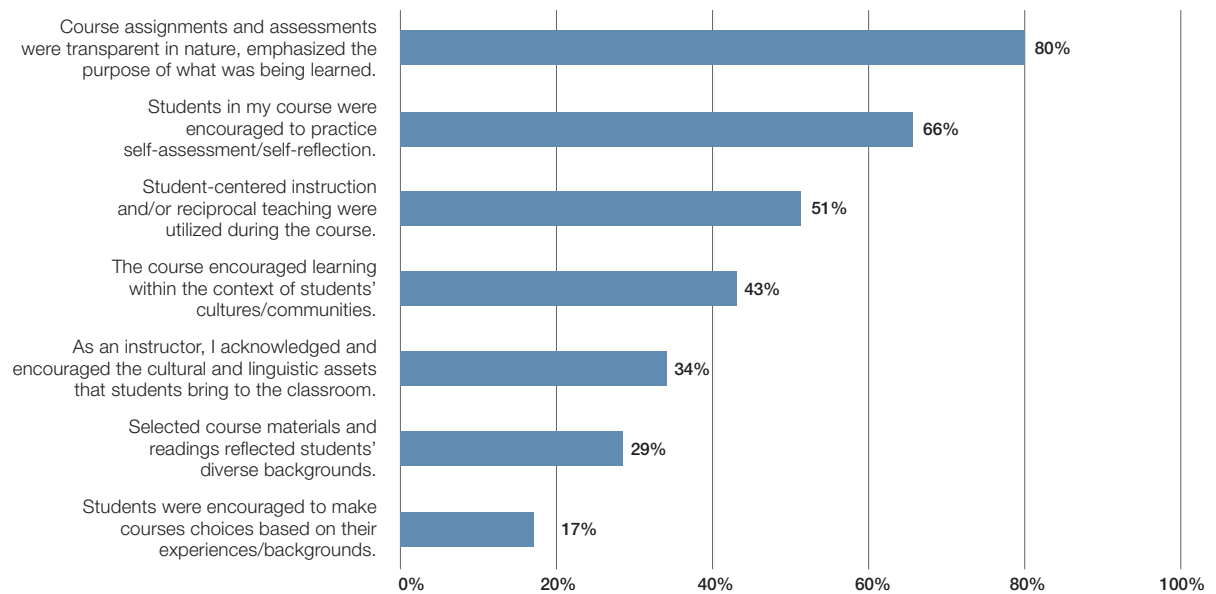


Figure 4. The Value of VALUE

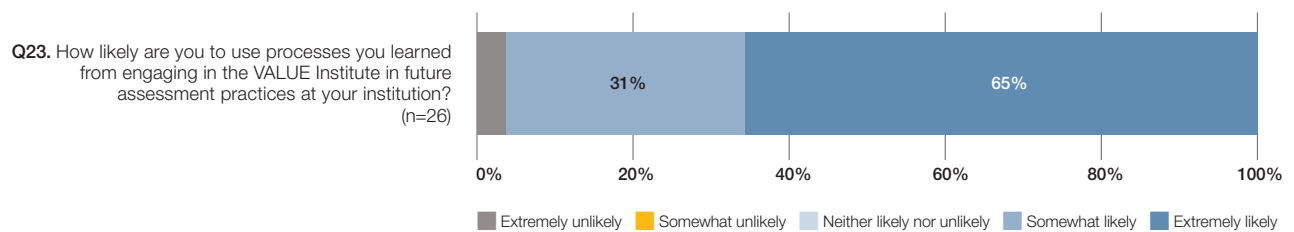


Figure 5. Equity-Mindedness Comprehension

Q14. On a scale of 1–10, please rate your understanding of the following defining components of equity-mindedness (Center for Urban Education).
Scale: 1 = No understanding, 10 = I understand this component completely

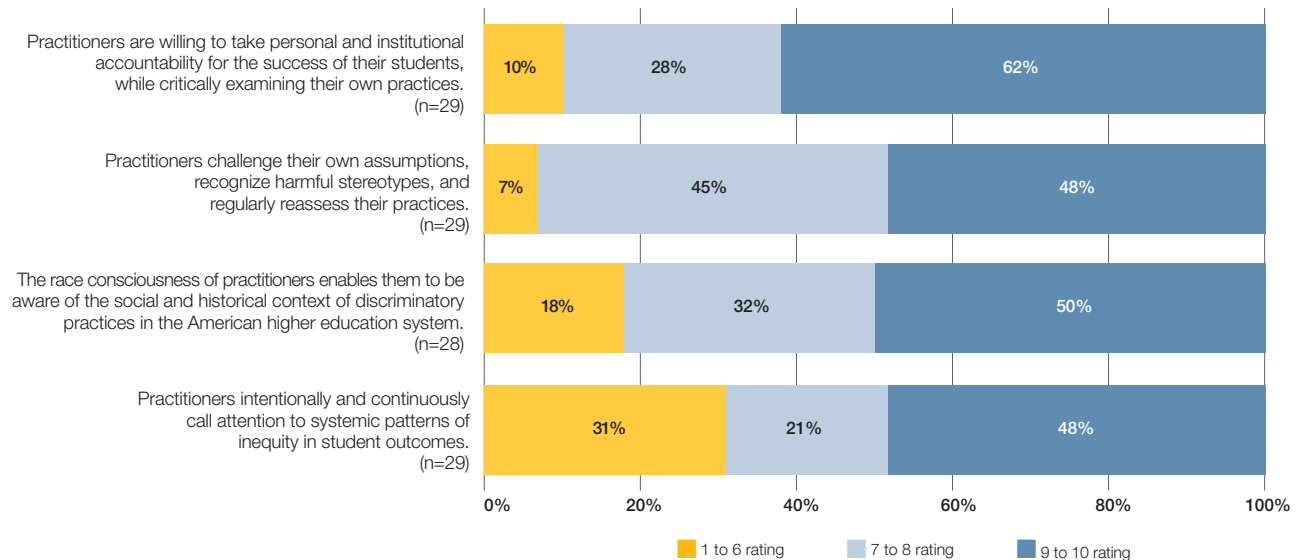


Figure 7. High-Impact Practice Implementation

Q6. Which of the following high-impact practices have been intentionally embedded into the selected pathway(s), course(s), or program(s) for this project?
Select all that apply. (n=38) Note: Percentages sum to more than 100 because respondents could select multiple options.

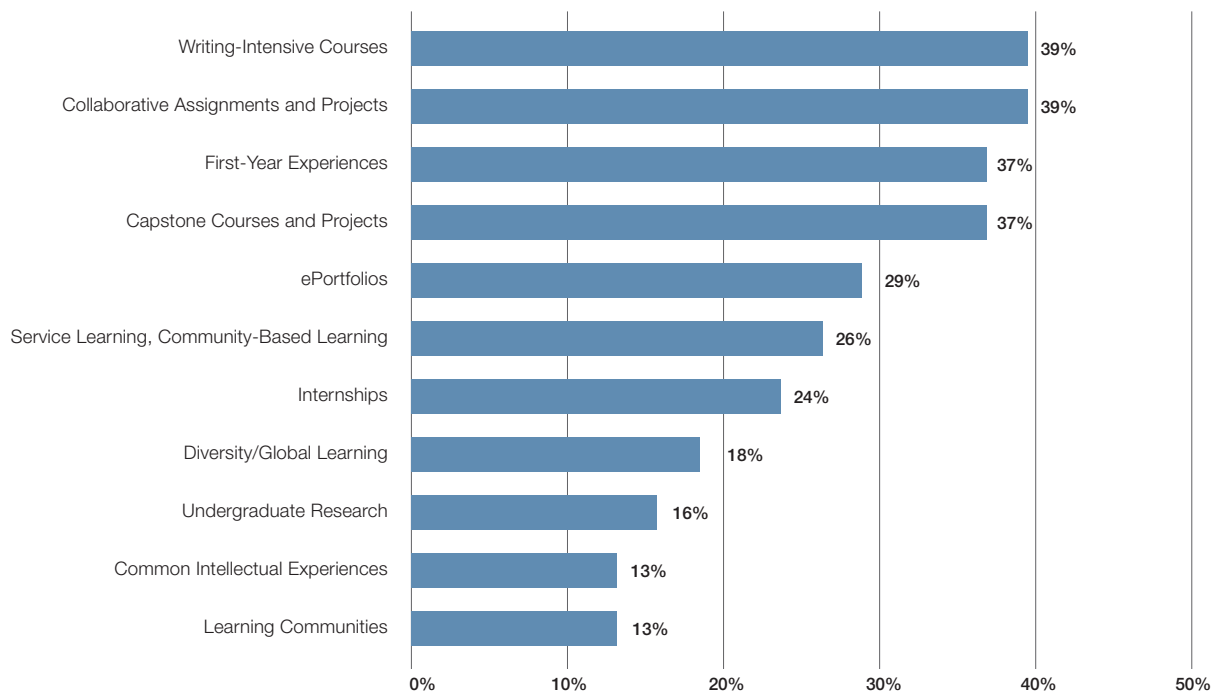


Figure 8. Quality Components Incorporated into HIPs

Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of 1–10 the degree to which each of the quality components listed below was incorporated into high-impact experiences. Overall, the majority of components were incorporated to a high degree, with just “publicly demonstrated learning” and “engaging with diverse people or circumstances” receiving mean ratings below an 8.0.

Q7. On a scale of 1–10, please indicate to what degree the following quality components were incorporated into the high-impact experiences within your course.
Scale: 1 = not incorporated at all, 10 = fully incorporated

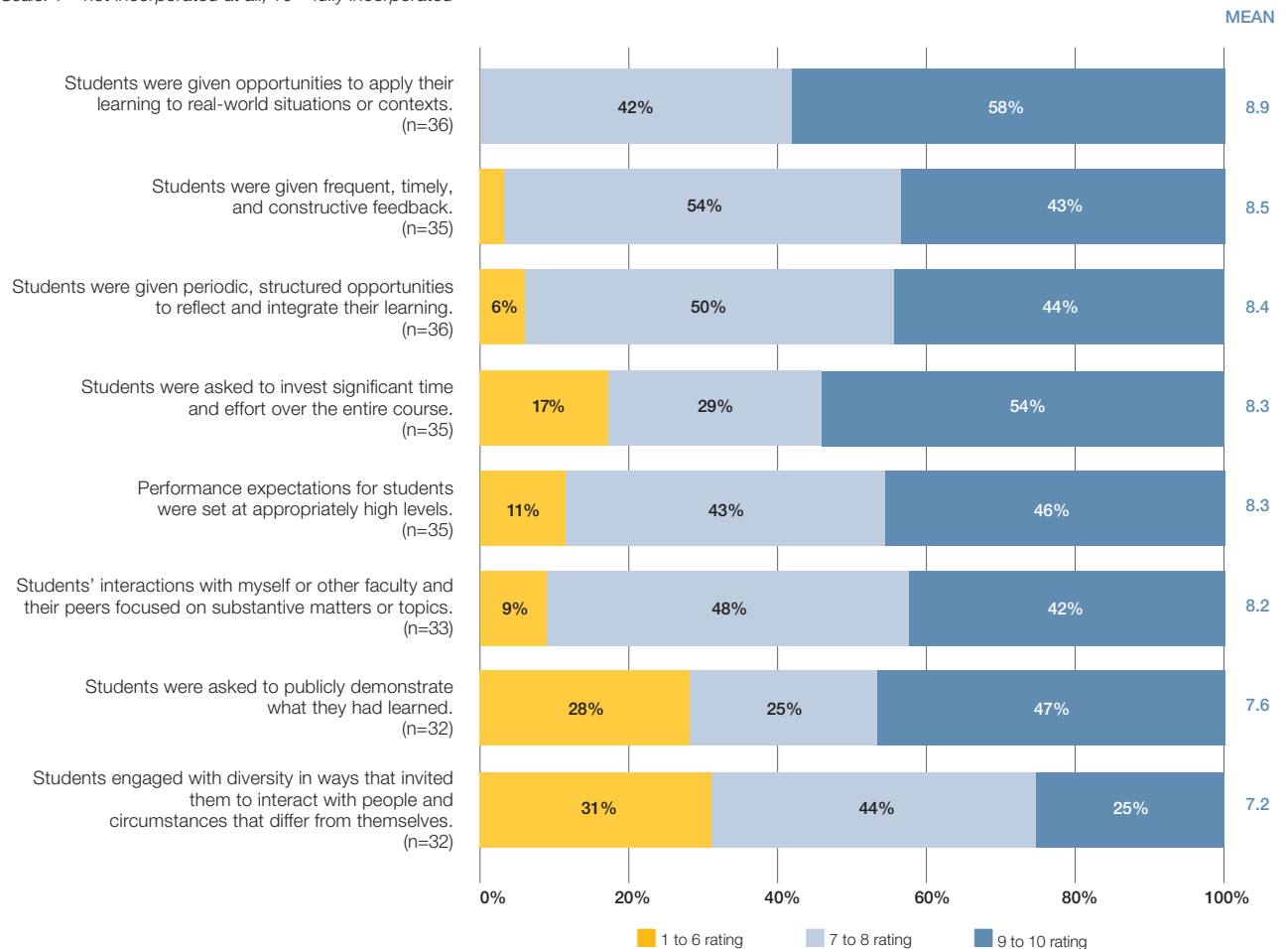


Figure 9. Integrating Equity into Practices

A clear majority of respondents indicate the Ensuring Students Are Learning project helped improve their focus on equity in designing high-impact practices (60% a lot + a great deal).

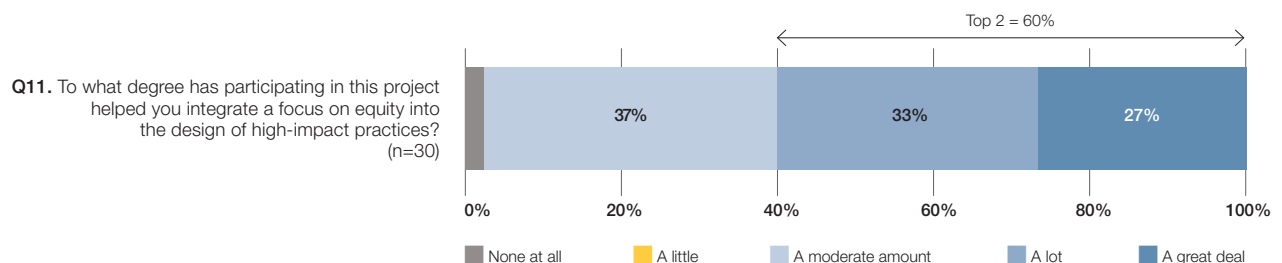


Figure 10. Improvements to Equitable Access of HIPs

Almost half of respondents affirm that the ensuring students are learning pillar had a significant impact on improving equitable access to high-impact practices for all students (49% a lot + a great deal), with only 11% indicating minimal improvements.

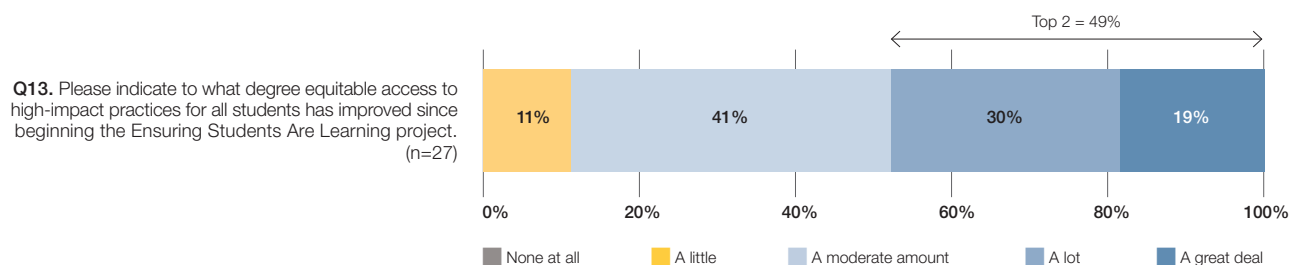
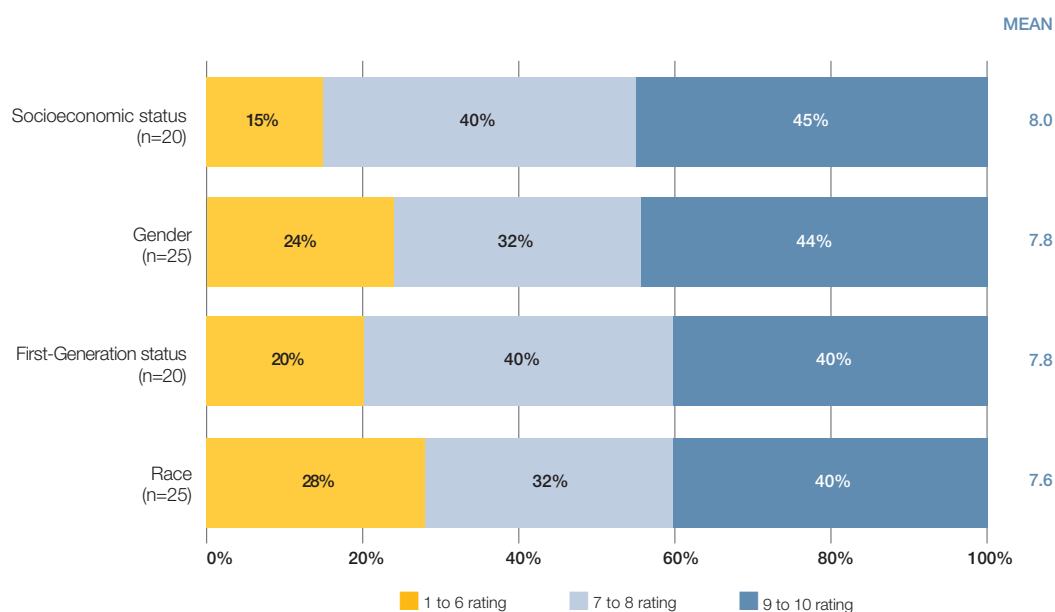


Figure 11. Equity Gaps in Student Participation within HIPs

When asked about equity gaps among specific student groups, a significant minority of respondents suggested minimal gaps exist (9–10 rating). However, about one in five respondents indicated room for improvement in equitable access in all areas, particularly related to race (28% 1–6 rating) and gender (24% 1–6 rating).

Q12. On a scale of 1–10, please rate equity of student participation in high-impact practices in your course, based on the following categories. Scale: 1 = There are very large equity gaps in participation, 10 = There are no equity gaps in participation.



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