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## Racelighting People of Color in the Community College: Implications for Future Scholarship on Race, Racism, and Racial Equity

**Rank Harris**, Associate Dean for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion and Professor, Administration, Rehabilitation, and Postsecondary Education, San Diego State University

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It is with great humility and enthusiasm that I deliver this year's keynote address. Before I begin, I would like to thank three colleagues who have served the Council with vision and integrity—Dr. Clara Crisp, who currently serves as president; president-elect and this year's conference chair, Dr. J. Luke Wood; and, of course, Dr. Ebony Zamani-Gallaher, the executive director of CSCC. I am so grateful for these three colleagues because their hard work and dedication to the association have afforded us the opportunity to build community, share our scholarship, and engage in important dialogue about critical issues impacting community colleges.

This year's conference theme is "Advancing Emotional and Well-Being Through Equity Mindfulness." This theme is so fitting for the 2023 conference. Our well-being is threatened by the chronic trauma and racial battle fatigue often ensuing from our courageous but exhausting efforts to protect the little progress we have made to advance equity since the Civil Rights Era. The work we do to center equity in educational research, systems, policy, and practice has always mattered. Perhaps now more than ever before, this work plays a critical role in shaping the future of postsecondary education, especially for students and communities who are served by community colleges: people of color, students with disabilities, parents, foster youth, justice-impacted students, poverty-impacted students, and all other communities with invaluable but underappreciated cultural wealth.

Of course, no conference, meeting, or conversation on equity mindedness would be complete without a huge shoutout to Dr. Estela Bensimon. For those who may not know, Dr. Bensimon is credited with blessing us with the concept of equity mindedness just over two decades ago. Although the concept has since gone mainstream, I remember when most educational leaders and researchers did not understand what equity mindedness meant, much less cared about it or endeavored to center it in their work. I observed folks attempting to publicly shame Dr. Bensimon for even daring to advance a "radical" and "divisive" concept like equity mindedness. Does that sound familiar? Yet, despite this reaction, she continued to do the important work necessary for equity mindedness to appear in every policy, journal, presentation, speech, and legislation we have seen for the past decade or so. The research agenda that emerges from this year's CSCC conference is so important because it is not only about advancing equity mindedness, but also about protecting Dr. Bensimon's legacy—a legacy from which so many of us who participate in CSCC have benefitted personally and professionally.

Given this background and context, what I hope to do for you as your keynote speaker is twofold. First, I present my and Dr. Wood's work on racelighting—a concept we developed to describe the process by which race-based gaslighting occurs and the deleterious outcomes resulting from it. Why? Racelighting is not only some of the most important work Luke and I have done in our 12 years as research partners, but it also has implications for our emotional well-being as we continue to work toward advancing equity mindedness.

The second thing I hope to accomplish during this keynote address is to lay out a 10-point program for community college research on race, racism, and racial equity. For those who may be wondering if this 10-point program aligns with the 10-point program proposed by the Black Panther Party in 1966, you are absolutely right. Why might I make this alignment? Many of the policy solutions proposed in the Panthers' program were perceived to be too radical and too sympathetic to the needs of the Black community. Coincidentally, some of these ideas are aligned with many of the same commitments we call for today, like employment that pays a livable wage, access to health care, affordable housing, education, clothing, justice, and peace (UC Press Blog, 2023). I believe it is no coincidence that some of the Black Panther Party's most prominent leaders earned PhDs and leveraged their degrees to advance social justice, notably Huey P. Newton, who held a PhD in social philosophy from the University of California at Santa Cruz, and Angela Davis who held a PhD in philosophy from Humboldt University in East Berlin.

The 10-point plan I present includes research topics and questions I believe should be prioritized in research, publications, presentations, grant proposals, political briefings, and other public-facing engagements that present opportunities for intellectual dialogue and engagement. This plan is not to suggest these are the only items we should prioritize in our scholarship, but I am advocating for a meaningful treatment of the issues, questions, and concerns that emerge from them.

Before presenting the details of the 10-point plan, I share details about racelighting. Racelighting is a concept Luke and I developed during the twin pandemics we experienced in 2020—COVID-19 and systemic racism. We define racelighting as an act of psychological manipulation whereby people of color receive messages that distort their realities and lead them to second guess themselves and their lived experiences with race.

Racelighting is rooted in the concept of gaslighting. The term comes from the 1940's film, Gaslight (Cukor, 1944). In the film, the main character, Jack, engages in acts to intentionally manipulate his wife, Bella, with the goal of controlling and convincing her that something is wrong with her and that she is not emotionally well. The film's title was derived from a type of lamp used at the time to light homes before electricity was available.

In the most simplistic sense, gaslighting is intentional psychological manipulation by lying or victim blaming. What happens when gaslighting becomes racial? George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Amaraud Aubrey, and Trayvon Martin were all Black folks murdered by police officers or police adjacent vigilantes. Instead of focusing on the actions of the people who killed them, almost by default, people were hasty to question why the victims were doing something they supposedly had no business doing—like using counterfeit money, dating an alleged drug dealer, or running suspiciously through a white neighborhood, as were the cases of George, Breonna, and Amaraud, respectively. Additional questions were raised about George's alleged use of methamphetamine, leading some people to attribute his death to the drug rather than Officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on his neck and restricting his breathing for nearly nine minutes. In Trayvon's case, people questioned why he wore a hoodie and did not yield to George Zimmerman when he tried to detain him.

The questions ensuing from the tragic murders of George, Breonna, Amaraud, and Trayvon represent the most grotesque and extreme examples of racelighting. However, less extreme but damaging examples of racelighting occur nearly every minute of every day on college and university campuses. It happens to students of color who are assumed to be less intelligent and less worthy than their white peers. It happens to faculty of color who are assumed to be hostile or defensive when they demand respect and appreciation for their contributions. It happens to administrators of color who are undermined consistently when they endeavor to create anti-racist institutional cultures. As a result, educators diminish the invaluable talent and cultural wealth we desperately need to solve our more challenging societal problems. Luke and I developed this conceptual model to help explain the process by which racelighting occurs. Racelighting is rooted in concepts like white supremacy, victim fragility, anti-Blackness, and systemic oppression.

These beliefs spawn both explicit and implicit racial bias. Implicit bias, the bias we are unconscious or unaware of, is reflected in nearly all our thoughts and actions. It tells us how to think, feel, and act in nearly every social situation in which we find ourselves. Implicit bias also tells us who to engage, embrace, trust, and avoid. Far too often, in my opinion, implicit bias is used to avoid holding bad actors accountable for their racist behaviors. Some folks are keenly aware of their deeply negative internalized beliefs and disdain for people of color. These folks are the same people who actively challenge efforts that can help to advance racial equity; they go out of their way to make things more difficult for people of color. Their bias is explicit and often unapologetic.

Bias, be it implicit or explicit, is often expressed by way of racial microaggressions, which are defined by our colleague Dr. Derald Wing Sue (2007) as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostility, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color" (p. 271). From our work, Luke and I have learned the three most commonly experienced racial microaggressions for people of color in educational contexts are (a) an ascription of intelligence, (b) an assumption of criminality, and (c) pathologizing culture.

Ascription of intelligence occurs when someone assigns a degree of intelligence to a person based on their race or ethnicity. Some common examples of this are assumptions about Asian Americans being good at math and science, which reinforces the model minority myth. Another example is the assumption that a Black or Latinx student should not attempt rigorous coursework because they lack the academic preparation to do well in these courses.

The second racial microaggression is an assumption of criminality. It is based on the assumption that people of color are dangerous, deviant, and prone to commit acts of violence or disobey the rules. One of the most disheartening examples of this microaggression is when faculty members call campus police because a student is being "loud" or "aggressive," and they want to make sure things do not "get out of hand."

The third racial microaggression is pathologizing culture, rooted in the idea that people of color come from families and communities that do not value education. Assertions like, "those students don't value education—they are just here for the financial aid" or "scholars of color don't really contribute to what we do here because they only focus on race in their work" are examples of this microaggression. I am certain most of you are recounting times in which you experienced situations like these or had to intervene when a student or colleague experienced them. I also suspect there have been instances in which you spoke up on behalf of yourself, a student, or a colleague, and the response you received was not one of accountability, but one of resistance instead. You were probably accused of being "overly sensitive" or told to "stop playing the race card," which made the situation worse because you felt unheard or felt no one cared about you or your humanity. There may have also been times when you wondered if you misunderstood the situation or maybe you were the problem, not them. Sadly, situations like these are regular occurrences in education, which is why racelighting is so prevalent.

Luke and I have come to understand two main ways racelighting occurs. The first, active racelighting, occurs when the person who is racelighting is keenly aware of what they are doing and intentionally tries to manipulate or harm a person of color emotionally. An example of active racelighting is when someone knowingly and deliberately says something racist, but blatantly lies when it is brought to their attention. They may even go so far as to accuse the victim of trying to "ruin their reputation."

We describe the second way racelighting occurs as passive racelighting. This racelighting happens when there is no intention to racelight, but someone says something racist and attempts to avoid accountability by being defensive or blaming the victim. Again, the intent here is not to racelight, but the consequences are still the same: feelings of doubt, insecurity, and frustration for people of color.

Finally, Luke and I have identified three main negative outcomes of racelighting: stereotype threat, impostor phenomenon, and racial battle fatigue. The first, stereotype threat, is a concept developed by researchers Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson (1995). They proved the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about one's race/ethnicity, gender, or cultural group has a negative impact on their performance on tasks associated with the stereotype. For example, there was—and perhaps still is—a commonly held assumption that students of color are not capable of performing well on standardized tests; thus, when people of color are aware of or reminded of this stereotype, it can engender pressure and anxiety to disprove it, ultimately negatively impacting their performance.

Impostor phenomenon is the second negative outcome of racelighting. Researchers Suzanne Imes and Pauline Clance first proposed impostor phenomenon in 1978 to refer to high-achieving individuals who believe they are undeserving of the success they have experienced and have an internalized fear of being outed as a fraud. People of color who experience racelighting in academic spaces consistently receive messages that suggest they are not good enough and have somehow gained access to status or opportunities they did not earn. When I think about impostor phenomenon, I am often reminded of a Latina community college professor whom Luke and I interviewed. She had a PhD in her field from one of the most prestigious universities in the country, and she struggled with impostor phenomenon because her white male colleagues refused to invite her to serve on important committees or collaborate on projects. She was often reminded she was the "affirmative action" hire. It is a heartbreaking story, to say the least.

Finally, we have racial battle fatigue. Dr. William A. Smith (2007) studied the effects of being immersed in chronically racist environments and developed this concept. According to Smith, racism—subtle or transparent—is experienced by people of color nearly every day of their lives. Because of this, experiencing racism becomes a core element in the identities of people of color—so much so that one would be hard pressed to describe what it is like to be a person of color without somehow considering one's experiences with racism. Smith also talked about the hypervigilance that emerges when experiencing racism, especially in chronically racist environments. Consequently, people of color often experience a host of physical and psychological symptoms that can be attributed to racial battle fatigue. How often have we heard our colleagues of color say they cannot focus, suffer from headaches, struggle with insomnia, or even deal with depression? These are all documented symptoms of racial battle fatigue.

Taking everything we know to be true about racelighting, including its consequences, we have an obligation as scholars who are committed to racial equity and equity mindedness to continue to pursue meaningful research that gives us the knowledge and tools necessary to transform systems and institutions to serve people of color equitably and responsibly. This work is incredibly difficult in the present context, where the conservative right viciously attacks anything that advances diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). To our colleagues living and working in Florida, Texas, and other red states, we have your back and will do everything we can to support you and your work. Nevertheless, we must press forward because what we do matters so much at this moment. The proposed 10-point plan offers suggestions for priorities in research, publications, presentations, grant proposals, political briefings, and other public-facing engagements as methods to press forward.

First, we desperately need research to better understand the impact of locally elected community college governing boards on efforts to institutionalize diversity, equity, and inclusion. I have observed how having a governing board that does not support these efforts can be an insurmountable barrier to advancing DEI efforts, even when there is sound policy and legislation like California's student-centered funding formula. Getting direct insights from community college presidents and chancellors who have to negotiate with governing boards that are anti-equity in their orientation would be incredibly value-added in the present context. It would be especially important to understand if and how these leaders can make progress on institutionalizing these efforts despite this challenge. Of course, we should also conduct this research to learn how having an equity-minded governing board can propel institutional DEI policy and practice. Finally, in relation to the impact of governing boards, it is necessary for us to recognize that serving on a community college governing board is often a pathway to elected positions in state and national politics. Thus, it is essential to leverage this research in a manner that helps communities understand the broader implications of who serves on their local community college governing boards.

Next, we need to have a deeper understanding of the impact of racial battle fatigue and racelighting on the mental health and wellness of students, educators, and campus leaders. As noted in my earlier discussion, the empirical link between racial battle fatigue and physiological and psychological health for people of color is well documented. The importance of this research in the present context in which racially hostile campus climates are becoming the norm cannot be overstated. Surveys, inventories, and other scales that help researchers measure racial battle fatigue can be useful for clinicians and mental health professionals to facilitate their clients' well-being. It would also be important to know how racial battle fatigue directly impacts student success, employee retention, and overall campus climate. We need research to identify and validate healthy short-term and long-term coping strategies for those who find themselves immersed in chronically racist environments. Although Luke and I often advocate for people to get out of racist environments as soon as possible, the reality is that being able to leave an institution can be a privilege not readily available for some students and colleagues.

A study of the lived experiences of women of color who serve as community college presidents is also needed. This idea reminds me of an important study by Dr. Caroline Turner in 2007 titled, "Pathways to the Presidency: Biographical Sketches of Women of Color Firsts." In this study, Turner interviewed Julie Garcia, Karen Swisher, and Rose Tseng, the first Mexican American, Native American, and Asian American women to serve as presidents of public baccalaureate degree-granting institutions in the United States. The participants talked about how their identities as women of color provided capital and vision that were essential in leading their institutions. The women also discussed the challenges they experienced as the first women of color to serve as president. Long-standing assumptions about what a president should "look like"—even more so, what an "effective" president should look like—suggest implicitly and explicitly that white, heterosexual, cisgender men are best suited for the role of president.

Despite ongoing efforts to reconsider these assumptions by diversifying the presidency, women of color still must navigate challenges that make it difficult to maximize their potential in this role. Constantly having to prove themselves, negotiating the presidency with the roles of parent and spouse in ways men are not expected to, and being intentionally excluded from professional networks that provide access to the capital and resources necessary to be an impactful president are just some of the known challenges. I suspect there are many more we do not know about. Furthermore, the challenges become more pronounced when we consider women of color who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community or have other intersecting salient identities. A more transparent understanding of the lived experiences of women of color presidents can go a long way toward shaping policy and informing the work of professional associations, such as the American Council on Education and the American Association of Community Colleges, which play an important role in developing and supporting women in the presidency. This research also has obvious implications for those who mentor and support women of color who plan to become community college presidents.

Most of us can recall public statements of solidarity and commitments to communities of color made by colleges and universities across the country immediately following the tragic murder of George Floyd. Around this time, many institutions began to recognize that their curricula were rooted in white supremacy and, in response, made commitments to do the work necessary to make it more culturally relevant and to acknowledge the intellectual contributions of diverse people. Today, we can see these were not genuine commitments at many—if not most—institutions. Far too many have gone in the complete opposite direction, even trying to ban the study of critical race theory and similar scholarship. We need studies that analyze the current policies enacted in states like Florida and Texas, particularly from those scholars who seek to understand how these policies impact faculty tenure, academic freedom, and faculty diversity. We also need to understand the impact of how these efforts impact student learning and success negatively. We also would be well served to have recommendations for what faculty can do to continue to be equity focused in their teaching and learning while not putting their careers and livelihoods at risk. I recognize this is an incredibly big ask that will require a lot of careful planning and thoughtful collaboration.

Moreover, identity-related conflicts that encourage men to perceive school as a feminine domain and to view opportunities for postsecondary education strictly from a breadwinner orientation have and continue to impact the enrollment and persistence of men of color. We need more research on workforce partnerships between industries and community colleges and how these partnerships can address barriers that impact the enrollment and persistence of men of color. We also need studies of successful minority male initiative program models that are impactful, scalable to large cohorts of men of color, and inclusive of men of color who enroll part time while working full time.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the huge disparities between students and communities with access to digital learning opportunities and those without access. We know these disparities are stratified heavily on the basis of race and ethnicity. Students and communities of color are less likely than predominantly white communities to have access to the technology and resources necessary to access digital learning equitably. Digital equity is having access to the technology and technological knowledge necessary to participate seamlessly and make meaningful contributions to virtual learning contexts. Since the pandemic, Luke and I began to encourage colleges to pay closer attention to digital equity. We desperately need research that teaches us how to center racial equity in digital learning, and this research must go beyond studies of student access to technology and address questions like "How do faculty build students' readiness to engage in digital learning after being away from formal education for more than a decade?" or "How can faculty use ChatGPT and AI tools to meet the learning needs of racially minoritized and other disproportionately-impacted students?" Regardless of the research questions explored, we must ensure students of color are not disregarded or left behind, and postsecondary education continues to become more reliant on digital technologies.

The racial/ethnic diversity of educators, especially among the ranks of full-time and tenure-track faculty, continues to be a challenge in community colleges. According to Espinosa, Turk, Taylor, and Chessmann (2019), 76% of full-time faculty at public 2-year colleges are white, which is higher than that of white faculty at public and private 4-year institutions. White students comprise 45% of community college students. In comparison, Latinx students are 27% of those enrolled in community colleges, but only 7% of the full-time faculty.

Representation matters. It is essential that students of color see themselves represented among the faculty who teach them, because doing so contributes to a sense of belonging, validation, and engagement for students. We also know faculty of color are more likely than their white peers to create a culturally relevant learning experience intentionally for all students. Studies contributing to knowledge on effective organizational practices in hiring and retaining racially diverse faculty in community colleges are needed. We also need studies that help to make the connection between racially diverse faculty and student success transparent. Finally, studies analyzing hiring policies in community colleges and how they contribute or create barriers to diversifying the faculty also will be valuable, contributions to knowledge, as will studies on implicit bias in hiring.

Dual enrollment, also known as concurrent enrollment, is another context in which racial inequity is prevalent. Like advanced placement courses, dual enrollment gives students opportunities to increase college readiness and increases the likelihood that students will persist through college. However, access to dual enrollment is not equitable. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education (2019), White and Asian students who attend to access dual-enrollment opportunities. More research is needed to identify and assess policies and practices that may increase access to dual enrollment for students of color—notably Black and Latinx students. We also need to understand the long-term impact of dual enrollment on college and career outcomes for racially diverse students.

Basic needs insecurities have become an important area of inquiry and intervention in institutional efforts to close equity gaps and improve student success for disproportionately impacted students in community colleges. Colleagues like Dr. Marissa Vasquez, Dr. Jared Gupton, and Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab have helped us understand how having access to nutritious food, affordable housing, reliable transportation, and technology is essential for students to achieve their academic and career goals. These scholars have also reminded us that food, housing, transportation, and technology access often are stratified based on race. Yet, racially minoritized students often are underrepresented among those who access resources like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Section 8; the WIC program for women, infants, and children; and campus-based supports like food pantries. Thus, future research on basic needs insecurities must somehow assess students' awareness of basic needs resources and how they gain access to them. We also need a deeper inquiry into understanding how salient identities that intersect with race and ethnicity have an impact on access. For example, Dr. Vasquez and her colleagues (2018) have written about the reluctance of men of color to use basic needs resources, which they attribute to issues of gender and masculinities. It would be important for us to understand if transgender students of color have their basic needs concerns adequately addressed in community colleges.

Finally, our research on race, racism, and racial equity must address the incredible amount of intersectionality across racial and ethnic identities. Important questions remain about the intersection of race with gender identities, sexual identities, caregiving identities, disabilities, spiritualities, and experiences with the carceral system. Similarly, we still have much to learn about Indigenous, Indigenous community college students' experiences. There are a lot of folks present who have long advocated for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the heterogeneity within the Asian American community. This community has had incredible cultural and linguistic diversity, but is often treated by scholars as a monolithic group. Luke, Marissa, and I have tried to model this in our work on men of color in community colleges by highlighting how the experiences of Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander men are more aligned with those of Black and Latino men than their Korean, Japanese, and Chinese male peers.

Again, I am not suggesting these are the only issues of race, racism, and racial equity in the community college we should address. In fact, I am certain we could easily identify at least a dozen more. But I believe these are worthy of our time and attention as we move into what appears to be a period of uncertainty about the future role postsecondary education will play in the United States. Please keep these areas of inquiry in mind as you start to make plans about grants you will apply for and doctoral students you will advise.

To contact the author, email [fharris2@sdsu.edu](mailto:fharris2@sdsu.edu).

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College of Education  
The University of Texas at Austin  
1912 Speedway, Stop D5600  
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